



VIJYANT AT KARGIL

THE BIOGRAPHY OF
A WAR HERO

COL V.N. THAPAR
NEHA DWIVEDI



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PENGUIN BOOKS

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VIJYANT AT KARGIL

COL V. N. THAPAR is the father of Capt Vijyant Thapar, Vir Chakra, who was a fourth-generation army officer. At the age of fifteen, he was selected for the National Defence Academy and commissioned on 12 December 1962 in the Maratha Light Infantry. He commanded a battalion of the Jammu and Kashmir Rifles. He was part of the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war and the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation war, and has operated in counter-insurgency operations. He is an alumnus of the prestigious Defence Services Staff College, Wellington. He has written for many publications and been a motivational speaker at various forums, universities, colleges and schools.

NEHA DWIVEDI, a Kargil war martyr's daughter and an Armoured Corps officer's wife, is a doctor by profession. She is an alumnus of Delhi Public School R.K. Puram and Lady Hardinge Medical College, Delhi. She sought solace and found her strength in writing post her father's martyrdom. She now lives in Mumbai, where she works as a childbirth educator and an infant and young child feeding specialist. She deeply believes in the healing and inspirational power of stories. This is her first book.

To the fighting spirit of the Indian Army.

To Tripta, a mother, who, like many other army mothers, bore the pain of her loss with quiet dignity, courage and fortitude, and to the nation, which came as one to support us in the time of crisis.

And to Vijender, Roli, Vasundhara, the coming generation who will uphold the torch.

‘To you who are the sons and brothers of the departed, I see that the struggle to emulate them will be an arduous one’—Pericles
(Peloponnesian War, Athens)

Foreword

It is a privilege to write a foreword to a book that celebrates the life of Capt Vijyant Thapar, Vir Chakra (VrC), who, at the young age of twenty-two, became a national icon—a symbol of exceptional bravery, dedication, patriotism and young military leadership.

Written by his father, Col Virender Nath Thapar (Retired), and Neha Dwivedi, who would have been assisted by Vijyant's mother, Mrs Tripta Thapar, and other members of the family and friends, this narrative cannot be more factual or authentic.

This book takes you through Vijyant Thapar's life and introduces you to his family, school and college friends, the Indian Military Academy (IMA) and, finally, his renowned unit, 2nd Battalion, the Rajputana Rifles.

Vijyant was not an academic topper in school or college. His heart lay elsewhere, mostly outdoors. He imbibed the high qualities required of a military leader through the *sanskars* (values) handed down to him by four generations of army officers in the family, training in the National Cadet Corps and the IMA, and the cantonment environment. The IMA is the fountainhead of military values—smartness, discipline, dignity, a strong sense of morality and integrity. Most important is its credo:

The safety, honour and welfare of your country come first, always and every time. The honour, welfare and comfort of the men you command come next. Your own ease, comfort and safety come last, always and every time.

He honed his qualities of camaraderie, compassion, military traditions and honour during his short-lived tenure in his battalion.

After reading Vijyant's letter addressed to 'Dearest Papa, Mamma, Birdie and Granny' many years ago, I had wondered about his thoughts and feelings when he wrote it. This letter is proof of his love for his kin, for the

Indian Army and the nation. Hidden behind the casual, carefree call of a young man ('my clan of the Dirty Dozen . . . live life king size'), there was a deep sense of compassion, regimental spirit, determination and extraordinary devotion to duty. He wanted his family to be 'proud of and never forget the sacrifice of his men'. His concern for the little girl Ruksana in Kashmir, even though he was staring death in the face, spoke volumes about his evolved and noble soul.

How did a person of such a young age think of all this when he knew he was leading his team into close combat, where he would face the ultimate danger to his own life and that of his colleagues? This book has come as an explanation to all these thoughts of mine. Quite obviously, real courage lies in moving forward despite the presence of fear. Responsible leadership sublimates the fear of the unknown. During the historic Battle of Tololing on the night of 12–13 June, he displayed this during the attack on Barbad Bunker, in which he led the assault with his platoon of A Company.

During the Kargil war, on 28 June 1999, I happened to visit the Tactical Headquarters of 8 Mountain Division, located near Drass. The general officer commanding (GOC), Maj Gen (later Lt Gen) Mohinder Puri, briefed me about the progress made by his troops in the Drass sector. He mentioned that a battalion of 56 Mountain Brigade would be assaulting Knoll and then capture the Three Pimples area early next morning. The task to capture Three Pimples had been given to the same battalion that had broken the stalemate at Tololing and given us the first battle victory—2nd Battalion, the Rajputana Rifles.

From our location, I could see the Three Pimples area clearly. It was a cluster of very sharp, craggy and imposing mountaintops. I could imagine the challenges the soldiers would face to get to and assault this feature. The time was around 3.30 p.m. On an impulse, to encourage the battalion and to wish it good luck, I asked Mohinder Puri if I could be connected on telephone to Lt Col (later Col) M.B. Ravindranath, the commanding officer of 2 Rajputana Rifles. Ravindranath, along with his small party, was then located near the forming-up location for the assault. He was taken aback when he learnt about the telephone call from the army chief. He spoke to

me in whispers, probably due to his close proximity to the enemy. I inquired about the battalion and wished him and his men good luck in their mission. This must have been a rare occasion in military history when an army chief spoke to a battalion commander just when the latter was close to a forming-up place in a battle.

The next morning, in the Military Operations Room of the Army Headquarters, I was informed that the Three Pimples area had been recaptured. Our soldiers had fought gallantly. But the battalion had suffered heavy casualties—three officers, including Capt Vijyant Thapar, and eight soldiers had been martyred while fifty-two other soldiers had been wounded.

That was one of my saddest days of the war. The battle of Knoll and Three Pimples was one of the toughest-fought by the Indian Army in the Kargil war. A detailed account and the role and conduct of Vijyant in this battle have been given by the author. For his exceptional act of personal bravery and leadership, Vijyant was posthumously awarded the Vir Chakra.

While the book remains focused on Vijyant, many serving soldiers and veterans (like me) will find it nostalgic too.

Before signing off, I wish to pay my respects to the Thapar family. Ever since the Kargil war, despite the loss of their elder son, both Virender and Tripta have shown tremendous courage and forbearance. They have addressed and inspired the youth of our nation whenever given such an opportunity. Vijyant, in his letter, had expressed a wish, ‘Please come and see where the Indian Army fought for your tomorrow.’ Year after year, Virender has been visiting Drass and, till recently, climbing up to the spot where his son was martyred.

This book is an excellent read. Towards the end, it may leave you choked up, as was my experience. It is also an important contribution to India’s military history, leadership and an inspiration to the youth of India.

28 March 2020
Panchkula

General V.P. Malik (Retired)
Former chief of army staff

Prologue

28 June 1999

Finally, the time had come. Men with faces covered with camouflage paint, with the white of their eyeballs visible in the dark, started moving forward silently like ghosts, clutching their AKs tightly. Muscles taut, jaws clenched, they advanced towards the crest. Robin raised his right arm and everyone froze as a shell burst in the sky some distance away, followed by a rattle of fire from the hill about 800 metres ahead. It was still dark but soon the almost full moon would rise and light up the entire area.

He looked at his sturdy G-Shock watch, which read 1945 hours, 28 June. In a few minutes, they would reach their destination. Around fifteen minutes ago, at 1930 hours, heavy artillery fire had started. He did not want to wait a minute longer than required, now that he was so close to the enemy. Suddenly, the machine guns opened up behind him. It was time. They held their breath in anticipation for the signal to move, their eyes fixed on the silhouette of the hill in front, from where flashes of fire were visible. And then it happened. A shell from the enemy guns landed in their midst.

29 June 1999

All of India was in the middle of Operation Vijay. The Indian Army was fighting almost impossible battles on the extremely tough and unforgiving heights of Drass and Kargil. After weeks of bloody struggle, the tables had turned. News of spectacular victories and stories of unbelievable courage of the valiant men in uniform were flooding the news channels, newspapers and magazines. While some just read the news with their morning cup of tea, others extended support to the officers and jawans by way of

inspirational letters, cards and other gestures. This was the first time the country was privy to inside news from the war zone, thanks to the various reporters, who brought it right into their living rooms.

Every new day brought with it some more ‘happy’ tidings as the nation sat and marvelled at the grit and courage of its soldiers. The valour of the real-life heroes was now being seen and appreciated in real time.

On this day, the country was waking up to the glorious news of another important feature, namely Knoll, being captured, ever so bravely, by the officers and men of the ‘Ever-Victorious’ 2 Rajputana Rifles, one of the most prestigious units of the Indian Army. But some families were destined to face the flip side of the victory. The painful side of war.

They woke up to the much-awaited call from the front. However, this time, they didn’t hear the voice they longed for.

A brother had no strength left to hold the receiver of the phone after hearing about his only sibling’s brave sacrifice.

A mother had her heart torn out as she was summoned home in the middle of her working day.

A father, who was always planning and building the brightest future for his son, bit by bit, had his dreams shattered into more pieces than he could count.

A young girl, who was busy counting the days until she would meet the handsome young officer her heart belonged to, was left abandoned.

A little child, who had perhaps learnt to smile again because of her angel in uniform, would never see his face again.

A friend, who was oceans away, had just dreamt of his best friend and woken up with a start, oblivious to what the phone call that would come barely a few minutes later had in store.

To the world he was but a man, but to many others he was the world.

The ‘world’, however, did come together, as the people of Noida made their way to Col Virender Thapar’s house on a hot Tuesday afternoon when they learnt of the brave sacrifice of a son of their own. The young boy—who had run on the streets and exercised in the parks till a couple of years ago, who had donned the smart uniform for barely six months after years of

preparation—had breathed his last in the highest tradition of the Indian Army. They couldn't wait to get a glimpse of the courageous son of their soil. The reaction to the sacrifice of this young and valiant officer drew from an entire city was the first of its kind. Until that day, no other event had united the people of the city in such a manner. Men, women and children alike, with an overwhelming feeling of love and respect, came together in large numbers to pay respect to the fallen hero and extend their heartfelt support to the bereaved family. The brave soldier deserved the utmost respect from his country, and every person present was determined to give him just that.

Thousands of people surrounded his house and waited for him to arrive, wrapped in the tricolour. His family and friends tried to hold their own. Their eyes were wet and their hearts heavy despite being full of pride. No one said it aloud, but each one of them silently wished: 'I wish it isn't our Robin. Not our sweet Robin.'



CHAPTER 1

A Military Wife

December 1975

It was a beautiful winter morning in Delhi. The year was ending on a high note for Maj Virender Thapar, who had just returned from the prestigious Defence Services Staff College located in Wellington in the Nilgiris District of Tamil Nadu. The young officer sat happily and contentedly, chatting over a cup of steaming hot coffee with his cousin, who was an IPS officer, in his brother's bungalow in Defence Colony, Delhi.

Virender, a third-generation officer in the Indian Army, was dedicated and hard-working. His family had seen a lot of upheaval through Partition, political turbulence and natural disasters. However, they had emerged tough and resilient to face any adversity. His father had survived the violence that had been unleashed in the aftermath of Partition but had witnessed his loved ones and friends being massacred, looted and their homes set on fire. He had fled with his family, leaving behind their house on Nisbat Road, Lahore, and moved to their ancestral home in Ludhiana. He could still feel the agony in his heart whenever he thought of those times.

Virender had always wanted to join the army. In those days, it was the preferred career choice among young men in Punjab. It had an aura, status and charm. The uniforms, the mannerisms, the discipline and the lifestyle drew people to join, and it helped that army officers were held in high esteem by everyone. This also reflected in the social fabric, where some families named their sons after army ranks, such as Jernial, Karnial and Subedar. Thus, Virender followed in his father's footsteps and joined the National Defence Academy in 1958. A dedicated army officer, he remained

engrossed in his work, books, guns, bikes and a big German shepherd named Rover.

This changed that morning when his cousin casually mentioned, 'Come on, Bini, let's get you married.' Virender surprised him with his casual reply, 'Sure, why not?' Coming straight to the point, his cousin told him about the girl he had in mind. That same evening, he took him to meet this young woman he thought would be perfect for his brother. She was beautiful, urbane, had good education and was from a well-to-do family. But he was wrong in his understanding of the kind of girl Virender would like. When they did meet, Virender noticed that she was a smart, fashionably dressed girl, broke into French now-and-then and had a dressing table full of exotic perfumes. It didn't take him much time to decide that they were not compatible. His decision annoyed his cousin, as he could not find anything that was not likeable about her. This went on for a few days.

One day, Virender's brother's wife, who had been observing his confusion for a while, brought up the topic of marriage again. She said, 'Bini, forget all this. I will introduce you to someone I think you will like.' He agreed and together they walked to the girl's house located in a nearby colony.

On reaching, he saw a beautiful, tall and elegant girl standing in the balcony, dressed in a soft brown salwar kameez, combing her hair. One look at her and Virender was sold. He smiled, turned towards his sister-in-law and said, 'Let's go meet her, Bhabhi.'

Virender really liked Tripta when he met her. He was attracted to her simplicity. He was also thrilled to know that she was a state-level sportswoman. In fact, they met her next at the Talkatora Stadium, where she was practising with a top badminton player. However, they couldn't meet her immediately as a session was under way. So, both his sister-in-law and he took seats in the stands, and after waiting for what seemed like a really long time, he dozed off. When his sister-in-law tapped him on the shoulder, he woke up with a start to find Tripta standing in front of them. She had changed out of her sports clothes and looked beautiful in a peach kurta and

white salwar. She had tied her long hair into a neat a bun. He offered to drop her home. Though they lived close by, they took a longer route to her house. By this time, it was clear that they both liked each other.

However, her family was apprehensive about the fact that he was in the army. They had misgivings about life in the services as no one in their family had experienced it first-hand. Friends, relatives and acquaintances tried to clarify their doubts, but, despite all explanations, their reservations remained. In the end, one of Tripta's close friends and classmates married to an army officer was summoned. She was the one who told her, 'Don't be mad, Tripta, you can't have a better life than in the forces.' Finally, assured and pacified by a person they trusted, the storm blew over. With their doubts put to rest, it became clear that Virender was a promising officer and Tripta complemented him with her simple charm, personality and calm demeanour. The match was perfect. She would fit in very well with army life.

Thus, as soon as the matter was settled, their families decided to get them married as Virender's leave was getting over. Without further ado, Virender and Tripta were married in the very next week, on 16 February 1976.

After the wedding was over, once again, Virender's cousin took over and presented him with air tickets for their honeymoon. All that the newly wedded couple had to do was pack their bags and take their very first journey to the land that was going to be integral to their lives—Kashmir.

However, on reaching the Srinagar airport, it didn't take them long to realize that they had not given the trip enough thought. The entire city was covered in snow. Since everything had been planned in a hurry, the Thapars hadn't even packed warm clothes, and Srinagar was very cold. There were very few tourists at the airport, and it wasn't easy to get help. Not one to be rattled, Virender did the first thing any army officer would do in such a situation. He quickly located a phone and dialled his course mate's number, who was posted to an important position in Srinagar. As soon as the officer came on the line, Virender informed him about his whereabouts and also that his newly-wed wife was with him, which jolted his friend into action.

Although taken aback, his friend wasn't too surprised, since Virender wasn't one to announce things about his personal life.

His course mate assured them that soon a car would come to pick them up and take them to a comfortable army guest house. Thankfully, the lounge at the airport was warm. When Virender turned around to tell Tripta about the conversation, they noticed a big, burly Kashmiri man in a pheran (a long loose coat) walking towards them. It seemed he had been noticing them for some time and had guessed their discomfort.

He was very genial. Greeting them warmly, he offered to take them to his houseboat for their stay. He even gave them a 50 per cent discount. He assured them that it would be a beautiful and comfortable place for them to stay and experience the real beauty of Kashmir in the most authentic manner. As the couple looked at each other, a little confused, the man sensed their apprehension. So, he offered to drop them wherever they wanted to go if they didn't like what they saw. Impressed with his sincerity and generosity, they decided to go along.

When they reached the beautiful houseboat, it took them barely a minute to decide that they would stay there. It was well furnished and comfortable, as good as any starred hotel. The deal was sealed—this would be their abode for the next few days. Kashmir in summer is rightly compared to paradise, but in winter its beauty is divine. It was simply magnificent. The Dal Lake was frozen, and the chinar and deodar trees, the sloping roofs of houses and the hills surrounding it were covered in a thick layer of snow. However, inside the houseboat it was warm and cosy with a cheerful fire burning in the hearth. The cuisine was exquisite, with each meal a large spread of various dishes flavoured with kesar and other local ingredients. Those were some of the most memorable moments of their lives.

The next day, they went up to the ancient temple of Shankaracharya on top of a snow-covered hill, from where they could get a stunning view of the valley below with the revered Hazratbal shrine on one side and the mountains on the other. In the evenings, they walked around the Dal Lake, eating almonds. Tripta also scoured the shops and finally bought a

pashmina with intricate work on it. Time flew rather quickly and the holiday soon came to an end.

Virender and Tripta were destined to start the journey of their lives in the same magical city that, in the years to come, would become a place of pilgrimage.



CHAPTER 2

The Baby

Days turned into weeks, weeks into months and, soon, the Thapar household was buzzing with the news of Tripta carrying their first child. The elders were pleased and the youngsters excited. Virender was over the moon and couldn't wait to meet his son. He would love and nurture him to become just like him. The thought that they may have a daughter never crossed his mind. While Tripta only hoped for a healthy and happy baby, Virender's future plans involved a boy.

In November 1976, they shifted to Nangal, a quiet, laid-back town in Punjab where everyone knew everyone, with Virender's family. This small town bloomed with natural beauty, with its lush green wheat fields with patches of riotously bright yellow mustard and a vast emerald-blue lake that stretched till the Shivalik foothills. The winters of Punjab added to the immensely beautiful landscape, as during those cold months the sugar cane fields would be enveloped in the morning fog.

The baby was due in the last week of December. It was a month of great rejoicing and festivities as Gurburab was just a few days away and Christmas and New Year were not far either. To the excited parents-to-be, it seemed as if the whole town was preparing to celebrate the arrival of their little bundle of joy. During one of their many conversations about the baby, they privately decided that if the baby was born on Gurburab, they would name him 'Guru', and if he decided to come on Christmas, he would be called 'Lord'.

On 25 December 1976, an exceptionally cold day, Tripta was admitted to a pretty little hospital on top of a small hill, which was named after

Virender's late uncle, a renowned surgeon who had retired from the army. Tripta had Virender's mother and sister, Sweetie, by her side throughout the labour. The doctors and nurses knew Virender well and kept him informed of his wife's condition. Finally, after a full day of labour, they told him to get the sweets ready. A beautiful baby boy was born on the morning of 26 December. He was a healthy and energetic child. It was Sweetie who rushed out of the room in excitement and gave her brother a big hug. 'Bini Papa, we have been blessed with a lovely boy!' she cried out.

When Virender saw Tripta holding the baby, he stood at attention and threw up a salute. There were excited felicitations, animated conversations and much happiness all around. Virender's father dished out lavish tips to the hospital staff, and Virender's mother, whom everyone called Mamaji, could not contain her joy.

Till the sun went down, relatives and medical staff kept flitting in and out of Tripta's room. Soon, it was time for the new family of three to be by themselves and everyone else returned home. As an exhausted Tripta caught up on some much-needed sleep, Virender continued to stare at his sleeping baby. The feeling of being a father to this little boy was still sinking in. He wondered about his son's future.

A few days later, mother and baby were discharged and brought home. A black-and-white photograph of an officer standing ramrod straight in his army uniform adorned one of the walls of the room that now belonged to the new family member, apart from a picture of Lord Rama. The photograph was of the baby's great-grandfather, who had passed away decades ago and had served in the Royal Indian Army in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP). His son and grandson had followed in his footsteps. The baby's grandfather would sit in the same room in his rocking chair, wearing his thick khaki overcoat.

Since Virender and Tripta's well-thought-out plans of naming the baby had been spoilt by his arrival in the middle of both the festivals, Virender decided not to rush and, instead, wait for a name that appealed to them enough. In the meantime, given Virender's love for the outdoors, he started addressing the newborn as 'Robin'. The name seemed to suit the little

smiling face of his baby, who would gurgle happily whenever anyone called him Robin. In no time, everyone started calling him that.

Robin's day would start with an abridged prayer recited to him by his parents in his room, followed by a good massage, bath and feed. The family's dog, 'Candy', a terrier, would bounce about excitedly and come in everyone's way. Then all the family members, who could never get enough of Robin, would play with him until he fell asleep. Robin was always a cheerful child, who hardly ever threw tantrums. This routine was followed like clockwork every day. Soon, days rolled into weeks, and Virender's leave ended.

It was time for the Thapars to leave the indulgent care of their family and shift to Virender's place of posting—an armoured brigade in the 'frontier' town of Pathankot.

It was a six-hour car journey to Pathankot, made tougher by the fact that they were travelling with an infant. After endless instructions from Robin's grandmother, Tripta settled comfortably in the back seat of the car, with Robin beside her in a small basket. Virender got behind the wheel and they were on their way. Soon they left the neat township behind and drove through the shrub-covered wasteland. Robin's first car journey was a pleasant one. Virender had acquired a Fiat Padmini, which would not overheat or break down. He drove slowly, keeping in mind the comfort of the baby, until the national highway took them over the big bridge across the Beas to Pathankot.



CHAPTER 3

Robin Becomes Vijyant

As the sun set over the horizon, casting a soft golden glow on the road, they reached the brigade located on top of a small hillock called Chakki Bank beyond Pathankot. They were to be housed in a ‘cottage’, if that’s what the two-room house urgently spruced up for their stay could be called. This was a famous brigade, as its units had earned great victory in the famous Battle of Basantar during the 1971 war. One of the heroes was Lt Arun Khetarpal, whose gallant acts had shone through the war and who had gone on to become the youngest officer to be awarded the Param Vir Chakra posthumously. It was perhaps most fitting that years later, Robin felt greatly inspired and drawn to the bravery of this war hero in particular.

The Armoured Corps is the arm of the military that goes to war in tanks. Since this was an armoured brigade, it had a large number of tanks and other such vehicles, including a few Centurion tanks that still had deep scars from the war. They had been hit by enemy fire but had miraculously escaped destruction. They, however, were not alone. Several officers and jawans who had fought the war from the tank units had sustained injuries too and were serving in the brigade. The relationship between the men and their machines had outlived the war and was perhaps deeper than many of the human ones they had built during their lifetimes.

Located very close to the Pakistan border, Pathankot was one of the biggest military stations, bustling with activity. Often, massive trucks towing huge artillery guns could be seen moving up the road or practising gun drills. Tanks would trundle by, throwing up clouds of dust and smoke. On most days, the cantonment itself would be teeming with soldiers in their

battle fatigues and armed with rifles, in trucks, jeeps or on foot. Every now and then, the tranquillity would be shattered by a screeching formation of jet fighters—low-flying MiGs—almost touching the rooftops before soaring skywards. They usually took off at dawn from the nearby airbase, where Robin's uncle was one of the flight commanders. Whenever he was leading, he would make sure to announce it by flying so low that it felt like one could just extend one's hand and touch the aircraft!

The shops in Pathankot were loaded with goods that the soldiers required, like jackets, sweaters and boots. There were many makeshift eateries as well, called dhabas. In fact, one of them, Frontier Dhaba, was quite popular with the officers and their families because of its tasty fare, especially the chicken and meat dishes. Thousands of trucks passed through the town every day, carrying all kinds of stores, including grains, steel bars, metal sheets, paint and petrol to the remote towns of Himachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir, and returned loaded with apples and other fruits, in addition to the wooden logs from orchards and forests far away. The national highway was sandwiched between the foothills and the border—at some places the border was so close that, with a little help from the army, one could see the Pakistani posts and watchtowers. It was also on the route to Vaishno Devi, Amarnath and other temples, as well as to holiday destinations in Himachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir.

Fortunately, the residence of the Thapars was away from the busy town, in a well-laid-out military station on top of Chakki Bank. The view was majestic from their little abode. The snow-clad Dhauladhar range on the horizon and the numerous pine-covered hill slopes were straight out of a picture postcard. The colour of the sky was a clear blue, the kind of hue only seen in the hills. Right in front was a kinnow orchard on a gently dipping slope, which went down to the almost-dry riverbed cutting across the road to the hill station of Dalhousie. The family had settled in well in their two-room cosy cottage next to the gardens of the officers' mess.

One lazy evening, as Virender was enjoying a cup of tea sitting next to a window in his house, he noticed some tank transporters. They were unloading the main battle tanks known as 'Vijayanta' (also known as

Vijyant). It was the first indigenous tank of the Indian Army and so had an appropriate name, which meant 'victory in the end' or 'end with victory'. As he was admiring the beautiful machines, the name touched a chord within him. It didn't just have a certain ring to it, but the meaning also beautifully captured all that a parent could hope for his firstborn. Excited by the idea, he immediately suggested it to his wife, asking for her opinion. Tripta, too, liked the name. It fit perfectly, and so no time was wasted in going through the rituals of a naming ceremony.

Hence, the young and playful Robin, to the joy (and relief, for having found a name they both liked) of his parents, became Vijyant Thapar.

Little did they know that their decision would turn prophetic a few years later, when a young Vijyant would join a unit whose motto would be 'Forever Victorious'.

Life in the cantonment was hectic. Inspections, visits, training sessions, regimental functions, get-togethers, parties and picnics kept everyone busy. Madhopur Headworks on the Ravi River, Pong Dam, Kajiar and Palampur, with hills covered with pine trees, were tremendous places for a break. Sadly, progress had bypassed Pathankot and it seemed time stood still in this ancient town. It was disorderly and unkempt. The main streets, courts and bus stands were all shabby, noisy and dusty. They were crowded with tractors, vehicles of all types and human beings. It was hard to see how it functioned at all. There was utter disregard for rules and authority.

But the situation had changed over the past few months. Emergency had been declared even before the Thapars had shifted to Pathankot. As a result, the traffic became orderly and the streets emptier. Banks, the railway department, courts and public offices began to function more efficiently. But soon after, the entire country underwent political upheaval.

Life in the cantonment, however, was relatively unaffected by these events. Until one day, most unexpectedly, Virender received his posting order to his parent unit, which was deployed in counter-insurgency operations in another corner of India. They had barely settled down when he was asked to move to Nagaland.

Since Robin was barely a year old and Nagaland was not a family station, it was decided that Tripta and Robin would move to Shimla, her ancestral home, while Virender would shift to Paphima (near Kohima). This was when the family faced their first separation, which was to become a regular feature later.

Once the summer capital of India, Shimla was beautiful, with its magnificent mansions, villas, soaring deodar trees, gardens and lovely weather. Tara Cottage, where Robin and Tripta lived, belonged to her sister and was a huge colonial mansion surrounded by mighty pine trees.

Soon Robin started taking his first faltering steps, and it was clear that he was an outdoorsy child who enjoyed seeing and exploring all that nature had to offer much more than being cooped up inside. Growing up in one cantonment after the other didn't just keep that interest alive, but also encouraged him to keep going after new adventures.

This was a time before mobile phones. Even landlines that had the facility to make STD calls were a luxury. So, just like every other family living separately, Virender and Tripta would write letters to each other. These would take several days to reach due to the remoteness of Virender's location.

Around this time, fortunately for the Thapars, a new rule was issued for personnel posted in Nagaland. Families could now join the officers for a period of three months. As Robin was now ten months old, Tripta decided to go. They took a flight first to Calcutta (now Kolkata). On his maiden flight, Robin was a source of entertainment for the passengers and hostesses. By the time they landed, he, too, had become so enamoured by the plane that he refused to get down, and ran back to the last seat. He had to be chased by the air hostess, who caught him and gently put him down on the tarmac. They then took a connecting flight to Jorhat, in Assam, accompanied by a battalion officer. Thereafter, a jeep took them to Tuensang in Nagaland. When they reached, Robin ran into his father's open arms. The joy of the journey paled in comparison.

Nagaland was at that time a land of mystic beauty in the isolated North-east. It is still full of jungles and bamboo groves, with the loveliest orchids

around, which are also infested with leeches. Once, the ever-curious Robin pointed at a flower and asked for its name. Upon learning that it was an ‘orchid’, he started calling every flower he laid his eyes on ‘orchid’.

The state and the areas across the border with Burma were inhabited by various warrior tribes. There were thirty-seven tribes, distinguished by their signature attire—the shawl. Well known among them were the Konyak, the Sema, the Angami, the Lotha, the Ao and the Tangkhul, among others. Kohima, of course, still enjoys international recognition as the advancing Japanese armies stopped here after a fierce battle in World War II. The cemetery here commemorates the soldiers who were killed in the war. A rock face has these famous words inscribed on it:

When you go home, tell them of us and say—for your tomorrow, we gave our today.

The family was given a room in the officers’ mess. The initial permission for their stay for three months was extended by another three on compassionate grounds, which was followed by another month till the original order was forgotten altogether. However, their luck ran out at some point, and they had to move out to the nearby family station of Jorhat, where they were given a makeshift accommodation. A small building was refurbished for them. They would come over to stay in the mess occasionally. A ‘field house’ was set up with some help from the unit. Some pots, pans, plates and cutlery, curtains and basic furniture were provided. Ever since they had got married, Tripta and Virender had to rough it out in such makeshift homes to be together. Many officers’ families had to do the same. Hence, they chose to be positive, never complained and made the best of their stay.

Virender was mostly busy with operational matters, so Tripta made friends with their neighbours, a Sangma couple. Taking a leaf out of his mother’s book, Robin made friends as well, albeit with a local puppy and rooster, which had been spared the knife because of its unusually beautiful feathers. When he got bored of his friends, he would kick around a football for hours.

To the annoyance of his mother, Robin would wake up early in the morning. So, he had to be dressed and fed and sent out with a jawan, who would gladly take him to play. They would take a leisurely round of the headquarters, exchanging greetings with the soldiers they met. Then they would go to the cookhouse, where, more often than not, the cook would be frying steaming-hot puris for breakfast for the personnel. One puri would be given to Robin, which he would nibble on till he met his dog, who would happily consume the rest. Occasionally, they would stroll up to the nearby short range, where troops would be firing rifles. In the evening, the officers and the ladies would get together for a round of rummy and drinks before dinner. The record player would play songs by the Carpenters and other artistes.

Sometimes, one of the officers, especially young Capt Clement, would lift little Robin and say, 'That's my boy!', making him giggle. In the mornings, the sight of the low-flying Dakotas going for supply drops to far-off posts would fascinate him. One day, he looked skywards and started yelling, 'Aeloplane, aeloplane!' To the surprise and slight disappointment of his parents, Robin's first word was neither 'mama' nor 'papa', it was 'aeloplane'! In these open and enchanting surroundings, a blissful year went by quickly. On Robin's first birthday, the three of them watched some brilliant military fireworks near the village of Changki.

Robin spent most of his infant years amid soldiers and guns, and it was evident that he liked it all. In the meantime, his father was promoted and ordered to command a unit from a different regiment. He was heartbroken. Like any infantry officer, he wanted to command the unit in which he had been commissioned. It is a sentiment peculiar to infantry officers, who, as they say, are born in the regiment and are part of it till they die. It's like a close-knit family. But orders were orders. Virender moved out to take over his battalion, which turned out to be an exciting, satisfying and challenging experience.

This time the family moved together and reached Barrackpore in West Bengal, where he took over the unit as the commanding officer.



CHAPTER 4

Sonar Bangla

Barrackpore, as the name suggests, was an ancient British cantonment of great historical importance. It had played a significant role in the 1857 uprising. Situated on the east bank of the mighty Hooghly, it was a key military base adjoining Calcutta, which was then the capital. The bank right opposite was known as Srirampore. The ferry that sailed between Barrackpore and Srirampore made for an interesting sight as the locals carried all sorts of things—from bicycles to goats and trunks—across the river. Barrackpore was also famous for the Mangal Pandey Park, with its lush green trees and a small monument that marked the place where the revolutionary was hanged.

Virender's unit was then training with tanks in an area near Kalyani, which was about 30 kilometres from the cantonment. The cantonment had comfortable barracks, playfields, ranges, messes, a swimming pool and an air force station next door. It also had a huge stadium where car and motorcycle races took place. Kalyani had been the site of an American airbase during World War II. The training area was full of small waterbodies like lakes and rivulets, and the unit had amphibious tanks. They would have drill sessions where the troops would cross these waterbodies, which were full of fish, prawns and water snakes. Initially, the men would be scared of the brightly coloured water snakes but would soon get over their fear when they learnt that they were not poisonous and would wriggle away when disturbed. This stage was called the tank and infantry cooperation training. To rid them of their fear of tanks charging at the infantry, the men would be asked to get down in the trenches and the tanks

would go over the pits. However, the rivers were dangerous and often troops and vehicles would get caught in the sticky clay of the riverbeds during low tide. It would be a sight to behold—troops stuck in the knee-deep mud of the tidal banks full of slush, trying to pull out a jeep that had been unloaded on the banks during high tide.

Like other places in Bengal, Kalyani, too, was famous for its exotic sweets, particularly chenna. The place was also home to artists of various disciplines—painting, music and sculpture. There was no place in the country like Krishna Nagar, which had a street full of famous sculptors who had made busts of great leaders using the soft clay of the river.

Tripta and the wives of other officers would often visit these places. Soft strains of Rabindra Sangeet would waft down the streets of Krishna Nagar and could also be heard in the camp after sundown.

In March 1979, after his return from the three-month-long senior command course at Mhow, Virender was promoted to the next rank, with an appropriate promotion ceremony. In keeping with protocol, a piping ceremony was conducted, where the then commanding officer put the stars on one shoulder of Virender and a young officer on the other. The incumbent stood in the centre, while his rank epaulettes of a major were removed and those of a lieutenant colonel put on. Finally, the commanding officer's baton was passed on to the new incumbent. Official ceremonies thus completed, it was time for a big party to celebrate the promotion and appointment of the new commanding officer, Lt Col Virender Thapar.

The house allotted to the commanding officer was a huge mansion, built in the time of the British Raj. It had a spacious courtyard and a driveway. Like all colonial bungalows, it had thick walls, high ceilings and ventilators, and the verandahs had magnificent arches. During the frequent power cuts, they would light lanterns that would cast long shadows on the walls and glow eerily. Those were the moments when Robin would cuddle up in his father's lap for fear of 'Wee Willie Winkie'. It was a character from one of the books that were read to him regularly. He would imagine that Wee Willie Winkie would come down the ventilator.

The house had so many rooms that most of them remained locked, barring a few in which the family lived. There was a big backyard with at least ten huge trees. The backyard was also home to colourful birds whose twittering would go on the entire day. A massive flower garden in the front and a vegetable garden at the back were the best parts of the mansion. The fruit garden yielded mangoes, jamun, coconuts and a few other local fruits, like litchis.

A troop of langurs had also made the high foliage their home. However, these animals were friendly, and Robin loved carrying out mock charges at them with a stick in hand and his dogs in tow. The langurs would then simply jump up the wall and swing up to the high trees. Slowly, the garden, and all that it had to offer, became his favourite place to be.

Robin was growing up to be a warm, friendly, ever-curious and outgoing child. He was now a happy three-year-old who was always seeking adventure. On the other hand, Virender was evolving as a father and didn't want to leave any stone unturned in the upbringing of his precious son. He made sure that everything needed to nurture Robin was made available. Hence, from a very young age, Robin had a rather large collection of Ladybird learning books for children, even though they were hard to find in India in those days. Thanks to Virender's persistence, Robin could recognize alphabets much before other children of his age. In Barrackpore, Robin was admitted to a private school. The minute he would return from school, he would run to the garden, chasing butterflies, catching tadpoles and collecting ladybirds and dragonflies. In the evening, he would be bathed, dressed and sent to the unit with his father's orderly. Often, upon returning, his pockets would be emptied by his mother and out would come all the beads, insects, shiny tinsel and other items that had caught his fancy. Tripta also took up a teaching job at the school. It was a welcome addition to the family income.

During vacations, Robin's cousins would come to visit and all of them would stay together in the large house. When Robin was about four years old, the younger ones decided to play a prank on their eldest cousin, Bonny, who was Virender's sister's daughter. She was older than Robin by a couple

of years and also the closest to him. So, when the mischievous kids managed to talk her into sitting under the jamun tree to ‘see what happens’ in the next few minutes, Robin rushed to her rescue and swiftly made her run away. What she didn’t know was that the tree was home to several anthills and the kids were waiting for the tiny insects to crawl all over her and laugh at her misery. Robin, however, did not find any joy in making anyone suffer, least of all his sweet cousin.

Robin and Bonny shared many personality traits, and perhaps that is what made their bond special. Hence, he always looked forward to her visits. She was also the one with whom, over the years, he would keep in touch and meet regularly, along with her younger sister Tonny. They lived with their grandmother, who always made it a point to visit Robin’s family every vacation with both the girls in tow, much to his delight.

During their visits, Tonny would be fascinated by his Ladybird books and would spend a lot of time reading them. On the other hand, Bonny and Robin would spend all their time together, making the most of their vacation. From putting up a little song-and-dance show for their parents—which usually included dancing to the Hindi song, ‘Nanha munna rahi hu desh ka sipahi hu [I am a little soldier, I am the protector of the country]’—to having each other’s backs and sharing secrets that only the two of them were privy to, their bond only grew stronger over the years.

Once the cousins would leave, Robin would go back to his routine—school during the day and his little adventures in the evening. The unit was also a hub of activity in the evenings. Jawans and officers from all sports teams of the battalion would play either football, hockey or basketball. The boxers would be busy sparring and the wrestlers grappling. Robin would be accompanied by the orderly, who was also a wrestler, and together they would watch the grapplers practise holds. He soon became their favourite. A national wrestler would even show him his biceps and give him handfuls of almonds for strength. On Sundays, he would get a nice oil massage and then, in an attempt to copy the muscular men, pose as a wrestler, displaying his biceps!

Every once in a while, especially during weekends, the family would go to Calcutta. The famous Flurys bakery was a must-visit for confections, followed by a drive along Park Street, a tram ride along Esplanade and some 'rasgoolas' from K.C. Das. However, the real flavour of Calcutta lay in football, politics and Durga Puja. During the festival, the pandals would compete with each other, with huge idols of the goddess Durga, decorative lighting, sweets, music, dancers beating big drums and cymbals, and simply unmanageable crowds. Outside their house was a football field where small-scale tournaments would be held. A huge crowd would gather to cheer their teams. Virender would take his canvas folding stool, on which Robin would squat, and they would watch the match. As the game progressed, tempers would rise. After the final whistle, the referee would flee the ground to save himself from the mob that believed their team had lost because of him!

Before the Thapars knew it, two years had passed. The unit had become Virender's home, but the end of command meant another posting and change of location. Thus, the Thapars were due to move again.



CHAPTER 5

The Mecca

Robin and Tripta returned to Shimla for a brief period while Virender moved to the dry and parched deserts of Suratgarh in Rajasthan. Robin attended his first proper school in Shimla, called 'Tara Hall'. On the first day, dressed in his uniform, he was taken to the popular Roshan's Studio on Mall Road to have his picture clicked. The photograph shows a handsome, healthy boy with sparkling eyes, looking sharp in a blazer, tie and trousers with well-polished shoes.

Robin enjoyed going to school and got along famously with all the children. Since Montessori was more about activities, he thrived there.

The family was reunited again just after a short while in August 1981 in the beautiful little town of Mhow. Virender had two tenures here, instructing young officers and junior leaders.

Mhow is a Mecca for army men. It is not really the name of a town and not even an acronym, as most believe. It was established in 1818, and many think it stands for Military Headquarters of War. But, in fact, it was named by the English after a small village nearby, called Mau. Some also believe it was named after a tree called mahua, which grows in abundance here; country liquor is also brewed from its sweetish white flower.

The charming cantonment is known to have quartered many famous regiments. It is said that Winston Churchill lived here for some time after being commissioned. After Independence, the Infantry School, Military College of Telecommunication Engineering and later the College of Combat were all located here. It had also been considered as a site for the IMA, among others, before Dehradun became the final choice. Located on

the Malwa plateau in Madhya Pradesh, Mhow has hills, streams and a beautiful climate, making it an ideal training area. It has Choral nearby, a thickly forested hilly area suitable for training in jungle operations and minor tactics.

For the Thapars, the small, pretty cantonment was straight out of the novels of Kipling—open, undulating spaces, small hillocks and tall, dry grass stretched for miles towards Indore, on the Bombay Road. Like Pathankot, Mhow was also a large, open military station. The sound of rifle fire was normal and could be heard at all times, since firing practice was always on for some batch undergoing weapons training. Like any other training establishment, the routine was strict and had to be followed to a T. From senior officers to NCOs (non-commissioned officers), the ‘students’, for that is what they were, could be seen going from one class to another constantly. The instructional blocks were solid, made of stone with typical English arches. There were old, gnarled trees all around—tamarind, peepul and banyan—some of them easily a hundred years old.

The endemic problem of family quarters was more pronounced in Mhow, as it was an officer-intensive station. Like everyone else, the Thapars, too, were allotted accommodation in temporary hutments called Karbala Lines, named after a memorable battle fought there by the British Indian Army. Their house had two small bedrooms and a living room. It was frugal, but better than not having anything at all. Robin had a room to himself, which he gladly shared with visiting relatives.

The army by now was a way of life for Robin. As soon as his father returned from office and kept his cane and peaked cap aside, Robin would rush to grab them. He would then wear the cap, hold the cane and admire himself in the mirror. Virender, with his smart uniform and authoritative demeanour, was slowly becoming his hero, someone he not only admired but also wanted to emulate. On the other hand, Tripta was the gentle and loving parent in whom he could confide. So, while he took his mother for granted at times, Robin would always do his best to remain in his father’s good books.

One day, while Virender was taking his afternoon nap, Tripta realized that she hadn't seen Robin for a while. She called out to him, thinking he was busy playing with his favourite toy, the 'gun', or had gone out chasing pretend enemies. When he didn't answer for some time, she got a little worried. She looked in every nook and corner of the house and then outside. Two hours passed and still there was no sign of him. Virender, sensing the panic, woke up and went to his cupboard to get a shirt to change into before heading out to look for Robin. He pulled the door open and took a step back with a start. Curled up into a ball on one of the big shelves, drenched in sweat, was his son!

When his mother asked why he was in the cupboard, Robin innocently said, 'I had climbed inside to get my toy, but then Papa came in and went off to sleep. Opening the door and climbing down would have made too much noise and that would have woken him up. I didn't want to disturb him.'

Though touched by his considerate gesture, Robin's parents asked him to never repeat such an act, as it would lead to unnecessary panic. Besides, he didn't need to put himself in such an uncomfortable position to make either of them comfortable. Robin, however, couldn't shake the habit and did exactly that in the years to come, not just for his parents, but for many others too.

Robin did not have any siblings till then, so he really looked forward to the company of his cousins, especially his sisters, Bonny and Tonny. Since they were both girls, he took great pride in teaching them 'outdoor activities' that 'only boys know how to do'. They, too, would follow him around and do as he said.

There was a temple with a small pond just a few minutes away from their house. It would often have tadpoles swimming in it. While their elders slept in the afternoon, Robin would quietly take his sisters to the pond for 'fishing'. They would take brightly coloured plastic mugs from the washroom and sieves that were used to filter tea, and he would show them how to 'fish' the tadpoles out of the pond and collect them in the mugs.

Their collection was thrown away eventually, but Robin would feel pleased that he had 'taught' his sisters some outdoor activity!

Fortunately, unlike Barrackpore, Mhow had no dearth of little children in the neighbourhood that Robin could befriend. There were kids his age who didn't just attend the same school, but also stayed close by. It was the most carefree and possibly the best period of their lives.

The kids would take to the streets in the evenings, chasing each other. Often there would be a shriek as some child would hurt himself/herself, while others would be cycling at full speed or be on top of the low roofs of their hutments, trying to retrieve some toy. This would send the pet dogs into a frenzy.

One day, Rani, a class three girl, who would go on to win many beauty pageants later in life, fell from a tree and fractured her leg. A few days later, Avinash, who would grow up to be a para-commando, had to be rushed to the hospital with a ball bearing stuck in his nostril, which had to be surgically removed. The colony was always buzzing with the news of such mishaps.

Every night, before going to sleep, Robin would listen to a story. As was routine, one night, he cuddled up next to his father to listen to the absorbing story of the adventures of a young boy. There was absolute silence, except for the sound of his father's voice and the occasional drowsy question from Robin. Suddenly, he started screaming, 'Papa, I am going to die!' Tears flowed down his cheeks, terror writ large on his face. 'What happened?' his father asked. But Robin kept yelling that he would die. After some affectionate cajoling and coaxing from his mother, he muttered that he had swallowed a marble that he had quietly slipped into his mouth during the story session.

Soon, the neighbours gathered. The boy was bundled into a car and rushed to the same military hospital that Avinash had been taken to a few days ago. The doctor on duty assured Robin that he would be all right, which pacified him. He was taken into the X-ray room, and soon a ward boy came back with a wet film that was jet black except for a bright, round, shining shape in the abdominal area. 'That, my dear friend, is your marble,'

said the doctor. He explained that because marbles have a smooth surface, they would pass out of the body without any intervention. He also advised Robin never to put any object into his mouth, ears or nose! Much relieved, Robin promised that he would be careful.

However, swallowing objects was the least of the Thapars' worries when it came to Robin. On the nights his parents were busy and couldn't read to him, Robin would pick up one of his books and flip through the pages himself till he fell asleep. One particular night, as his parents were sitting down to dinner, they smelt, and eventually saw, smoke coming out of Robin's room. They rushed in to find one side of their son's mosquito net on fire! Robin had carried a lamp inside the mosquito net to read and had dozed off, causing the lamp to fall and burn the net. Thankfully, Robin was unhurt and was pulled out in the nick of time. The slightly scorched book, though, was preserved and kept as a memory of his childhood antics.

Though the time spent in Mhow was full of fun, frolic, accidents and mishaps, it was also one of the most memorable for Robin for another reason. Life for him changed when his younger brother was born on 16 September 1982.

A free bird until now, his behaviour underwent a sea change upon the arrival of his little sibling. He now preferred staying home to loitering outside. At first, it was just curiosity—he was amused to see the little child with twinkling eyes shaking his hands and making funny sounds. As the baby started gradually reacting to sweetly uttered words or gentle actions, he became Robin's personal playmate. He would often touch his baby brother's cheeks softly, afraid to pick him up in his arms.

Robin's little brother was nicknamed 'Sparrow'. There were plenty of sparrows that lived in the false ceiling of the rooms, which may have been the reason for the christening. During the day, they would come out and fly away. However, one day, a baby sparrow fell down from the rafters above the bed where Robin and his father were lying. Seeing the misery of the bird, Robin felt pained. Virender picked up the lifeless chick and placed it in the reeds and shrubs outside. When Virender returned, Robin was deep in

thought. He was thinking about the chick that had the same name as his brother.

‘Papa,’ he said, ‘can we change Sparrow’s name?’

‘Why, Robin?’ his father asked. Robin didn’t reply, but Virender searched for the answer on his face, and, sure enough, found it in his sad, helpless eyes. He had not liked seeing the pain of a bird with the same name as his baby brother. At six, Robin could feel the kind of emotions that were lost on people much older than him.

When Tripta was asked about what to do, she said, ‘Yes! Let’s please change it. In any case, I don’t like the name, and the bird he is named after isn’t really pretty.’ So ‘Bulbul’ and ‘Ghugi’, meaning dove in Hindi, were considered among other names but rejected. After some brainstorming, Virender said, ‘Let’s name him Birdie!’ The name embraced both his love for birds and his passion for golf.

With that, Sparrow became Birdie. His official name, however, was Vijender.

One day, both boys were taken to a studio in Mhow Bazaar to get family photographs clicked. As most people didn’t have personal cameras in those times, going to the studio to have professional family portraits taken was common practice. For one of the pictures, six-year-old Robin was made to sit on a cane chair with Birdie on his lap, as he still could not take care of himself. Robin, with almost paternal tenderness, tried to hold his four-month-old baby brother so that he wouldn’t fall. It made for a beautiful picture, capturing his concern for the baby.

For Robin, the arrival of Birdie was a happy diversion. He was very protective towards him and felt it was his duty and responsibility to teach him how to walk and talk. He would hold his little hands and ask him to walk, guiding him as he took tottering steps. He would later even teach him how to write.

As a child, Virender had been given an English Raleigh tricycle. Now it lay in a corner of the house, unused. When Robin was two years old and they lived in Barrackpore, it had been taken out, cleaned, oiled and made ready for his use. At that age, he would just sit on it and be pushed around

by someone, but as he grew older, he caught on quickly. Having learnt how to cycle at an early age, Robin now thought himself to be an expert and fully equipped to teach other children. Hence, when his cousins came to visit him during one of their vacations, Bonny and Robin took it upon themselves to teach Tonny how to ride.

After several failed attempts, one evening, an idea struck Robin while they were playing outside on a slope. Tripta and his grandmother were taking a walk with Birdie, who was gurgling happily in his pram. Bonny and Robin took Tonny up the slope, dragging her cycle alongside. Upon reaching the top, they asked her to mount the cycle and let go, hoping she would handle it. They looked on with pleased and contented smiles on their faces as Tonny's cycle slowly started rolling down. Just as they were about to congratulate each other on the success of their genius plan, Tonny, having no control over the brakes, crashed into the pram carrying Birdie!

She got up in horror as both Bonny and Robin ran down to help her. Forgetting her own physical pain, she quickly jumped towards Birdie to see if he was hurt. Birdie, who had fallen out of the pram, had a little bump on his head. Thankful that her strict uncle wasn't in sight, she heaved a sigh of relief. She was very fond of her aunt, as she was the softer one and never scolded any of the children, no matter what, so her presence was more comforting than scary. Reassured that all was fine, she made a silent promise to herself to not get talked into learning anything else by the pair standing nervously in front of her.

However, just a few days later, she found herself caught in their shenanigans again. Every morning, after freshening up and getting dressed, the children were given their breakfast, which had to be finished before they were allowed to get into any other activity. They would all follow the instructions without much fuss, except when there was porridge on the menu. Bonny in particular didn't like it and would always find ways to throw away the contents of her bowl.

One time, she distributed little spoonfuls in all corners of the house, with help from her partners in crime. They almost got away with it, but the elders soon realized what they had done. The punishment meted out was

that they had to spend the rest of the afternoon cooped up in one room, as opposed to venturing outside, so that they could introspect on their mistake. The introspection didn't last too long, as, within a few minutes, Robin devised a game plan. The room was full of boxes. They chanced upon some cotton rolls in one of them. He quickly picked them apart and spread them out on the floor. Some rearranging of the trunks was also done. They were now on a ship, trying to catch fish in the sea!

They were in the middle of the game when something unusual happened. There was some noise outside, which drew their attention to the window. There was a procession of some kind out on the road. As it came closer, they realized it was the last journey of an officer. Robin quickly jumped down from the trunks and dashed to the window. He stood holding the iron grills with both hands, his nose sticking out through the gap. The other two got restless about getting back to the game but Robin stood there, quietly, patiently, watching as the uniform-clad men walked by slowly, in respect for the fallen one. He didn't know who the officer was, but just the way he was being carried filled him with immense pride and respect. He stood and watched in rapt attention, refusing to move until they were out of sight. It was a different side to the playful Robin that his sisters had never seen before. They didn't know what was going on in his heart at the time, but the way he reacted to the event showed his deep love for the uniform. Possibly, Robin himself didn't understand it either.

Once the procession passed, they went back to their game. However, this incident stayed with the sisters forever. That was maybe the first time they understood the passion with which their brother loved and respected the forces, even as a child. It all made sense now—why most of his games and stories had a backdrop of the forces.

The soldiers, guns, tanks, the sound of bugles and rifles firing, in addition to parades and sports, were his life. Subconsciously, all of this collectively left an everlasting impression on him. He didn't understand a life without them.

In the meantime, the household was also blessed with a litter of six Dachshund pups. Their presence was a matter of excitement for Robin and

amusement for Birdie. In six weeks' time, they were all distributed and only one was left for the family.

As was inevitable, their time in Mhow also came to an end and the family started packing up and preparing for their next home.



CHAPTER 6

When Men Were Boys

The next stop in the Thapars' nomadic army life was Meerut. Even today, the city is associated with the uprising of 1857. It houses the famous Kali Mandir that played a crucial role during the uprising. It was here that the mysterious chapatis were distributed as a mark of allegiance to the rebels. Interestingly, the church here, where English officers and their families were attacked and killed, was used to film the famous movie *Junoon*. It was at the Kali Mandir that so many of those who took part in the uprising prayed before taking up arms.

Meerut was once home to three major Indian Army regiments—Dogra, Sikh and Punjab—that had seen action in far-flung theatres of war and earned laurels. Later, the infantry regimental centres were moved out to make place for the fighting formations closer to the border. Besides them, the Army Supply Corps Centre and the Remount and Veterinary Corps Centre were also located here.

It was a typical cantonment, with large open spaces and fields, making it look more like a sports facility. It even had stadiums and swimming pools, which were rare in the 1970s. Robin had learnt to swim earlier in Mhow and now took to the pool easily.

The Meerut cantonment was planned by the British after much deliberation. An artificial water channel was created to cater to the needs of the station, which separated the town from the cantonment. Today, it has been reduced to a sewer called 'Abu Nulla'. Situated to the west of Abu Nulla, the cantonment was designed in the shape of an inverted 'L'. The top arm of the inverted 'L' made up the British artillery, cavalry and infantry

area. The longer arm housed the Indian troops. On the outer periphery of the designated sections lay the training area, ranges and parade grounds. Behind these lay the barracks, playfields and living area for the other ranks. Behind them were quarters for the NCOs and their families. The last belt was the most important. It lay along the Mall Road and had the officers' accommodations, including giant bungalows, messes, the club and the Company Bagh.

The Company Bagh was a botanical garden with big trees and a cricket stadium tucked into it. There were bazaars with common names, like Sadar Bazaar, Tope Khana Bazaar or Lal Kurti Bazaar. The buildings were made of stone and stand tall even today. A few of them date back to 1822 AD. The bungalows were built in such a way that they remained cool—the bedrooms were hidden from direct sunlight and the roof was made of thick layers of reed. The cantonment had its own hospital, schools, church and cemetery. Small buildings that were earlier used as operas later became cinema halls with English names like Regal and Venus. There were many old shops with wooden signboards announcing that they had been 'established in 1884'.

The club, named after Gen Sir Hugh Wheeler, is in use even today. Back in the day, its main hall was adorned with tiger skins and deer antlers while the verandas were lined with fine ink sketches of pig-sticking and other sporting events. However, most of the trophies deteriorated over time and were eventually removed altogether. There was a splendid golf course as well since many army officers love to take up the sport. Apart from this, there was even an old decrepit racecourse.

Two cemeteries chronicled the history of the place, with graves from even before 1857. Unfortunately, some of these have been vandalized. The city has retained much of its ancient flavour and character, full of landmarks from the uprising, like the Meerut Jail, Kali Mandir, Ghanta Ghar, Lal Kurti, where some British officers, their families and servants were killed by the rebels, and Pul Begaum.

Col Virender Thapar and his family lived in No.1, The Mall. It had lovely hedges and flower beds all along. Just behind the Mall Road were the

popular schools, St Mary's Academy, St John's Senior Secondary School and Sophia Girls School, which most children attended. Robin and later Birdie joined St Mary's, where their uncles had studied more than two decades ago. Their mother joined Sophia Girls School as a teacher.

Robin was seven years old then. Learning to adapt to new cities and making new friends came naturally to him. Still a lover of the outdoors, he was happiest when out in the open, playing his favourite games. Virender, on the other hand, took on the responsibility of a disciplinarian and also their teacher. As a result, he became the stricter parent, while Tripta continued to shower her sons with love and pampering care.

Robin, being the elder one, always tried to shoulder responsibility and set an example for Birdie. Virender wanted to encourage his elder son, so he started making little changes to his daily routine to toughen him up. In the afternoons, on Virender's instructions and to Tripta's dismay, Robin would be made to sleep on two chairs put together rather than on his bed. Virender also started taking more interest in his studies as he wanted him to excel in all fields. However, Robin wasn't one to keep his nose buried in books all day. When made to study, he would ask his father to read to him instead. Being inherently outdoorsy, the need to absorb bookish information was lost on him. He learnt far better by experimenting and exploring. Hence, he was an average student but excelled at and thoroughly enjoyed sports and other outdoor activities. It was a sight when he jumped from the diving board of the swimming pool. At six, he could jump from the highest board, a feat very few children his age even attempted, let alone succeed at. He swam on his own as there were no coaches. It was just one of his many interests at the time.

Robin was a dreamer. Though he loved to sleep, the strict regime followed at the cantonment did not allow him this pleasure. Every morning the reveille would be sounded by scores of bugles near and far in the units and the flag staff house. Thus would begin the humdrum routine. School was a bit of a haze for a boy like Robin. Nevertheless, he had to go every day as his father gave no leeway in the matter. Every morning, a military shaktiman truck—modified into a school bus—would honk at the gate and

all the children would run up to grab their favourite seats in their fresh uniforms, returning dishevelled and drained out in the evening.

Given his friendly nature, Robin was quick to make new friends, and in his school in Meerut too, he interacted and played with all his classmates. But soon, for the first time, he made a best friend, Parag Aggarwal.

Parag had been in the same school since lower kindergarten while Robin joined in second grade. The fact that he was a new student while Parag already had a group of friends never mattered to either of them. Parag was drawn to Robin's infectious positive attitude and enthusiasm, and wasted no time in befriending him. While the other boys in the class would get into small tussles and fights with each other occasionally, this new boy never seemed to get ruffled by anything. One time, when all the boys were chatting among each other, including Robin and Parag, it was revealed that both Robin and his little brother were named after birds. The boys found this funny and started teasing Robin about it. He simply laughed along and did not let it get to him. He did not fight back or hold a grudge against anyone. Parag couldn't help but admire this quality in someone his own age. His friend was different, and Parag knew it.

Soon after he joined, Parag and Robin became benchmates and would spend most of the day together. Often, between lectures, the boys would put blazers on their heads and chat away, making sure that no one was within earshot. They would spend the recess devouring not just their own but others' tiffin as well. Their favourite used to be the cakes their mothers would bake regularly.

They also loved acting out TV commercials. Both of them would often break out into little performances, where they would mimic the actors in the latest TV advertisements, choosing the funniest of them all. This would often make the rest of the boys burst into laughter.

One day, Robin returned from school terribly excited and in high spirits. On being asked the reason, he replied, 'It was a very special day today. Mother Teresa came to our school. Not just that, she petted me fondly and said that I was a good boy!' He beamed with pride at the compliment and was happy all day.

The fun didn't finish in school. Once home, the boys would eagerly wait for dusk and then run out to play. Robin had also befriended his neighbour, Donny, who went to St Mary's as well. Their fathers were colleagues and friends, with similar towering personalities and dedication to their profession. Hence, both Donny and Robin harboured the same dream of becoming like them one day. A fence separated their houses, and Robin would use it to cross over to their neighbour's house. As soon as he would be bathed and dressed to step out in the evening, he would crawl under the fence (imitating commandos) rather than walk in through the front door. Sure enough, even before the games would start, he would be soiled from head to toe, beaming from ear to ear.

Once Robin's father left for the golf course, it would be a free-for-all. Their garden was in ruins because the boys of the block found it the most suitable for their game of cricket. Windowpanes were often smashed, but Tripta just did not have the heart to interfere, unlike the other blocks, where they would get into trouble for creating a ruckus. They would also play another game, called War-War, in which Robin would lead the 'Indian Army' and his brother the enemy, which would always lose.

Robin took great pleasure in the success and achievement of his friends and loved ones. He didn't have a jealous bone in his body. One day, he came home jumping with joy because Donny had stood third in class. When his parents inquired about his marks, he replied, 'I did okay but that doesn't matter! Look at Donny!' He was genuinely happy for his buddy.

For Robin's birthday and Christmas, their father would organize a treasure hunt for the brothers in their front lawn. He would hide small gifts for them to find, which would include bats and stumps, among other things. Donny and his other friends would look on as Robin and Birdie ran around to find their little surprises, cleverly hidden away by their father.

Weekends would be reserved for the popular Sunday 'brunch', which the family would attend along with other officers and their families in the officers' mess. Even at these brunches, Virender would be found standing with both his boys in the lawn, quizzing them on the names of the various

flowers on display. He would also tutor them about their names and pronunciations. ‘Repeat after me, cri-sen-thae-mum,’ he would say.

In winters, the officers’ mess garden would be a riot of colour. Large beds of exotic flowers lined the massive lawn, which was a little bigger than a basketball field. There were pansies, flocks, carnations, lilies and many other varieties. Some were bright yellow while others were white and red, making the garden a vivid kaleidoscope of colours. The boundary wall was hidden behind a mass of ‘sweet peas’, diffusing a sweet fragrance right up to the gate. With a clear blue sky, the weather would be perfect for basking in the sun. The children loved to be part of these brunches, since it was one of the few get-togethers where they were allowed. They would have a whale of a time shrieking and chasing each other. The women, dressed in beautiful sarees, would sit together, chitchatting, while the officers would stand in small groups, talking shop and sipping cold beer. Soon, the brunch, usually of dosas and vadas or biryani, would be served and everybody would eat to their heart’s content. It was a ritual followed in many messes as and when an opportunity presented itself. For the other ranks too, Sundays were relaxed with some special fare.

Just beyond the boundary wall of the mess was the Remount and Veterinary Corps Centre. It took pride in having some of the best horsemen and steeds in the country. The muscular horses, with shining skins and manes, and exploding energy, were a sight to behold. Their grace when they jumped, their speed when they galloped and their power when they charged were unbelievable. There were fine Arabs, Kathiwadi and English of different colours—white, grey, black and chestnut—constantly puffing with restless energy and straining at their reins, asking their riders to go. Some had common names, like Badal, Sikander, Chua or Bijli.

The elegant riders, in their turbans, could be seen riding their powerful animals in perfect harmony. They would jump and gallop down the strips at breakneck speed with lowered lances, trying to hit the ‘peg’ in tent-pegging or in polo matches. Even the children could learn how to ride, so Robin and his friends made sure they didn’t miss out on this exclusive experience.

In equestrian sports, nothing is more exciting than a fox hunt, as done in England, along with pig-sticking. In Meerut, the sugar cane fields along the marshy, broken banks of the Ganges, covered in tall weeds called 'sarkanda', would abound with wild boars. This area is called 'Kadar' because it is sandy and barren. The riders, for whom pig-sticking was the ultimate test of horsemanship, would gather here before sunbreak at a point where a wild boar had been previously sighted. Then, as the first rays of the sun would light up the fields, the horsemen would spread along in a wide arc and start flushing. The horsemen, in their pugrees and with glinting lances, would look quite regal. A few elephants would also be arranged for the ladies and the more adventurous children to watch the proceedings from a safe distance. True to his nature, Robin would never miss a chance to partake in this activity. Nothing would happen for a long time as they would plod along. Off and on there would be a false alarm when a family of partridges would take off in panic. By midday, the elephants with their charges would return to the camp. They would all have lunch and, after some rest, get up on the horses to ride around the camp. The horsemen, on the other hand, would go back to looking for the elusive boar. Suddenly, there would be a rustle in the weeds as a wild boar would break cover. The hunters would begin the chase in earnest then. Loud yells and excited shouts would break out. Some horses would buck and throw their riders off. Many horsemen would fall and break their limbs, but the challenge of the hunt was something that few would miss. The chase would carry on for hours, until the mighty animal would suddenly round on the horsemen and charge at them, while they, with extreme skill, would dodge it and thrust a lance into it. Other horsemen would join in and thrust their lances into the huge boar as well. To the other riders away from the scene, the cheers would mean that they had caught the first boar.

As the sky dusked, a horn would be heard in the distance to announce the end of the hunt. Soon, the hogs would be brought in, exciting the young boys. The night would end with a campfire. Everyone would gather around, telling jokes about the riders falling and being chased by the boar! Robin,

not wanting to miss out, would sit as long as possible, forcing his sleepy eyes to stay open, before eventually retiring to the tent.

Once, Virender took Robin on a small shooting trip. They waited for a few hours but without any luck. As the sun began to sink, so did Robin's face. They were exasperated and thinking of turning back when they heard a partridge call, and brought the jeep to a stop. From their position, it would be a difficult shot because the partridge was about 75 yards away between them and the setting sun. There was light traffic on the road, which further narrowed their window to aim and fire at the bird. Virender kept his .22 calibre rifle aimed at the partridge but could not find an opportunity to fire at it for a long time. When he did, Virender aimed carefully, inhaled deeply and fired. Before he could see the result, Robin, who had been holding his breath anxiously, shouted, 'Papa, we got him!', and tightly hugged his father. Unmindful of the traffic, Robin rushed across the field to pick up the prize. Virender grew higher in his regard from that day on.

Robin had subconsciously started emulating his father from a very young age. Not only did he dress and talk like him, but he also imitated his father's handwriting. Robin took satisfaction in the little pleasures of life and his father's gestures for him were the most prized.

Since they now lived closer to the extended family in Chandigarh, there were frequent visits during every break. Robin looked forward to visits from his grandmother and cousins, Bonny and Tonny, as eagerly as they did. His grandmother would always come bearing gifts and pamper her grandsons silly. The extreme heat of northern India made the girls' skin break out in painful boils and pimples. When he saw them, Robin would joke, '*Aa gayi Miss Phoda Phunsi* [Here comes Miss Pimples]!' The teasing wouldn't stop there. He would even tell an already scared Tonny how the doctor was going to give her injections to treat the pimples. Years later, once they were grown up, Tonny often wondered aloud if Robin would welcome them as 'Miss Wrinkly Crinkly' when they all grew old.

It was around 1986 that a parachute battalion commanded by Virender's friend was stationed at Meerut on its way to Sri Lanka, deployed with the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF). The friend asked Virender to join him

for a meal in the tent that served as an officers' mess. He sent the only available jeep, which had just returned from the workshop, where it had been fitted with an anti-tank gun. The sight of the gun-mounted jeep in their compound was a source of great excitement for Robin. Without waiting for a second, both the boys were up on the jeep, fiddling with the knobs and levers of the mounted gun and admiring its large barrel. The height of pleasure for Robin was when he was allowed to sit with the gun crew. After the meal, Virender and Robin left and got off at the Safipur Ranges, where the troops were firing their weapons in target-practice drills. Robin watched his father with admiration as Virender shot a few practice rounds. On an impulse, his father asked Robin if he would also like to fire. Flabbergasted, he said yes! Virender knelt beside Robin and let him hold the pistol, cupping Robin's small hand, and together they squeezed the trigger. That was the first round that Robin had ever fired, and he followed it up with another four. He was thrilled beyond words; the excitement of having fired a real weapon lingered for a while.

Unknowingly, Robin had begun taking little steps to his ultimate path in life. Though he belonged to a family of soldiers, Robin never had to be reminded of it. He was inclined towards this way of life. Perhaps his lineage had already decided the path he would choose. He would grow up to follow in the footsteps of the men in his family and join the Indian Army.



CHAPTER 7

Pathankot 2.0

As months passed, winter gave way to the sweltering heat of summer. For the residents of Bungalow No.1 on The Mall, the huge, ancient trees provided the much-needed shade and cool breeze.

The political atmosphere, too, was one of extreme discomfort. In Punjab, things were getting out of hand. Reports of violence against innocent civilians were pouring in on a daily basis. For a while, trouble had been brewing in Amritsar and all over the state. Bomb blasts in buses and crowded places had become frequent. Weapons and ammunition were being smuggled in from Pakistan. One day, a senior police officer, Avtar Singh Atwal, went to pray at the Golden Temple and was shot dead when he came out. As a result, firing and violence increased.

On the night of 1 June 1984, a strange quiet descended on the cantonment. It appeared that 9 Mountain Division had moved out to Punjab. The army had been called in to bring the situation under control. The temple complex was heavily fortified. The army decided to smash open the heavy main gate of the complex by charging at it with an armoured personnel carrier (APC), but a well-placed rocket fired from inside stopped the APC in its tracks. There was intense fighting thereafter. Peace was restored eventually, but at a very heavy cost.

A few days later, Virender was sitting with a colleague when they once again saw units moving out. When he asked what was happening, his friend said, 'Don't you know? Indira Gandhi has been shot dead.' Virender almost fell out of his chair when he heard this. By the time the troops reached,

massive riots had broken out, and arson and murder were rampant. Unfortunately, many people died before it ended.

At that time, Virender owned a Crown colour TV set. Robin watched the events on news channels. The bomb blasts, the dead bodies and the burning buildings had a significant impact on him.

Meanwhile, serious developments were taking place in Ladakh and higher snowbound mountain ranges north of it. Pakistan had been coveting the areas of Siachen all along, but before they could act to occupy it, the Indian Army swiftly moved in and occupied the strategic heights of Saltoro and Bilafond-la.

The Pakistan Army was angered by this loss and stifled by the defeat of the 1971 war. It was perhaps then that the seeds of the Kargil operation, which they thought would redeem them, were sown.

Time passed rather quickly, especially in a household with two growing, active young boys. Before they knew it, Virender's tenure in Meerut ended. Almost four years had flown by in the blink of an eye, and he was posted back to Pathankot for the second time.

Finding an immediately available and appropriate accommodation for the families of officers has been an age-old problem for the Indian Army, one that continues even today. Therefore, many officers either plan for their families to join them at a later stage or the family makes do in temporary lodgings until a house is allotted. So, Virender decided to leave Tripta and Birdie behind in Meerut, while Robin and he moved to Pathankot's Mamoon Cantonment. It was decided that his wife and younger son would join them in a few months. Mamoon was being developed to become one of the biggest military stations in India at that time. Virender and Robin drove down in their newly bought Maruti Suzuki 800. It was in high demand at the time when only Fiats and Ambassadors ruled the roads. It was a pleasant and smooth drive.

In Mamoon, they were put up in the bachelors' accommodation of the officers' mess, like some other families. Their next-door neighbour was a

south Indian officer from the Signal Regiment. He had an over-energetic son about the same age as Robin, hobbling about with a leg in plaster. He had sustained the injury while trying to ape Spider-Man and falling from the roof. He, Robin and the other children got along well when the fathers were away at work.

Mornings were reserved for physical-training sessions, and Virender would go out for a jog with the other soldiers. Meanwhile, Robin would be served breakfast in the room. One day, when his father returned and sat on the sofa to remove his PT shoes, he suddenly noticed Robin pouring milk into an empty rum bottle. To his horror, a green snake was writhing inside it. The poor snake was struggling to stay afloat. Shocked, Virender turned to his son and asked, 'What in the world do you think you are doing?'

'Why, Papa, don't you see? I am just feeding this snake,' Robin replied innocently.

Had Virender not come back from his training in time, perhaps the snake would have literally drowned in the 'milk of human kindness'! Completely unaffected by the wriggly creature in front of him, Robin continued to have his breakfast of eggs and toast nonchalantly. In fact, he was mighty pleased with himself for having saved the snake. The bottle was immediately removed and the poor snake delivered from Robin's affections. How the snake got into the bottle and how the bottle got into the room remained to be satisfactorily answered. But poor Robin lost what he thought would make a lovely pet.

Birdie was four and Robin ten when the family moved to Pathankot. This was when the brothers really started enjoying each other's company. Robin now had a real partner in all his activities and experiences. Sometimes Virender would take them to a place called Joginder Nagar, where they could see a timber trail. Dressed in oversized sweaters and hats (which, in Robin's case, would be a combat cap), both the boys would run up the inclined road. Running with his big brother was a moment to cherish for Birdie. Robin, too, would be careful not to race and would pace himself instead. He was aware that his younger brother would emulate him and so would act accordingly in his presence. Mamoon had an uneven ground,

thorny shrubs, plenty of insects and birds, even small animals waiting to be discovered. Often, the boys would get together and set off along one path or another, doing things and going on adventures that only they knew and understood. They would sometimes run off to the banks of Chakki River flowing nearby.

A year later, at the club's swimming pool, Robin took up Virender and his friend's challenge to do twenty-five laps. He asserted he would do fifty. Unsurprisingly, he won and had to be pulled out after he had done seventy laps because the chlorinated water would hurt his eyes.

In those days, young boys were taken for trekking by the army. One day, Virender asked his elder son, 'Say, Robin, would you boys like to set up your own camp and stay out the whole night?' Robin reacted as if he had been offered the world, and let out an excited, 'Oh yes!'

With that, off he went to tell his friends the exciting news, and it was decided that they would camp out on Saturday. His younger brother also joined them. The boys were most excited about the idea of spending a night away from home all by themselves. A tent was set up in a eucalyptus grove in Mirthal, just a few hundred yards from the banks of Beas. They were told to dig a trench around their tent to keep snakes away. Some packed food, bottles of water and a lantern were given to them. They were so enthusiastic that the trench was dug in two hours flat. Virender instructed the CRPF post to take care of the boys and keep an eye on them. Satisfied that the boys were safe and prepared, he left to let them enjoy their time out.

As the sun hung low and eventually darkness descended, fear took hold of the boys. Suddenly everything around them appeared evil. However, determined to make the most of their camping trip, they stuck together, not daring to move. Somewhere between chatting and telling each other stories, they slept off. In the morning, they were greatly relieved to see Virender standing next to the jeep, sipping tea. Robin and Birdie ran to their father and hugged him. But it didn't end there and eventually turned into an adventure that the boys would remember for a long time.

A golden dawn had broken over the mighty Beas, which was just 400 yards away. Virender had planned a surprise for them. He informed the boys

that their adventure wasn't over yet, as they were going on a boating and fishing trip. The kids could not believe their luck! They hurriedly gulped down their breakfast and piled into a country boat. It bobbed in the rippling waters before the oars pushed it forward. Two or three lines were cast. Robin held a fancy Japanese fishing rod, which had just been procured from the canteen. They all stayed silent so as not to disturb the fish, anxiously hoping that any moment one of them would land a huge mahseer or rohu. But they were disappointed as the fish refused to bite. All the lines were recast, but to no avail. Then his father, in a subdued voice, told Robin to come to his side as there had been a tug on his line! Excited, Robin went over and the rod was handed to him. He was told to land the catch with a gentle pull. And there it was—a fair-sized mahseer, which sent up a loud cheer. Quickly, the boatman cut the line and put the fish in a bag. The party turned around for Pathankot. Robin would open the bag every now and then to check on the catch. The kids never found out that Virender had anticipated a no-catch situation and had bought a mahseer from the fishermen. When no one had been looking, he had hooked and lowered it quietly, saving the day.

Hence, fishing became one of their favourite sports. They would always look for opportunities to set out on a trip. The best occasions were when relatives would come visiting. One time, their dear aunt Sweetie, who was also present at Robin's birth, planned a visit. The brothers could not contain their excitement of taking her fishing. Since she was the youngest of all her siblings, she was more like a friend to the children.

All the arrangements were made beforehand. The minute she reached, even without letting her have her tea, the boys made her hop into the jeep that had been waiting to take them to the river. She enjoyed their company and didn't want to disappoint them, so she tagged along. As soon as they reached their spot, Robin excitedly took out his fishing rod and began attaching the hook to it. However, in his hurry, he ended up injuring Sweetie's hand. The sharp end of the hook pierced her thumb, causing severe bleeding and pain.

What was supposed to be a fun and adventurous excursion ended with a trip to the military hospital. A stern scolding was meted out to all three, including Sweetie, by Virender for not handling their excitement responsibly.

Robin was now stepping into adolescence, and his age was bringing out many positive aspects of his personality. Being the younger child, Birdie loved to follow Robin around and be part of all his games and activities, and Robin would happily indulge him. Instead of competing with him, he would let him win. He always thought of Birdie as his responsibility, and would always be available to solve his problems or give him gentle pushes when he needed them. When Birdie would refuse to go to school for fear of getting scolded by a teacher, Robin would comfort him by explaining the importance of education. Besides, he would be there to take care of him. Every now and then, Robin would also end up taking the blame for his brother's shenanigans. Even though the parents were aware of this, they would let him do so in order to instil confidence in Birdie for his brother, thereby strengthening their bond. Robin was protective of Birdie at all times, and, as parents, Virender and Tripta could not be more satisfied. In fact, they would often tell their friends how well behaved their boys were.

There was never a dull moment in their lives. Even in a city as small as Pathankot, the family made many memories to cherish. One of the best outings was to Rohtang where the boys sledged down a slope covered in fresh snow. The cherry on the cake was that they got to witness the shooting of a film starring Rishi Kapoor.

From Mamoon, they would also go to Jammu often. The border was very close to the road and one could see some of India's watchtowers. Often, Virender would be sent to visit forward posts. Pakistani troops were deployed on the other side of the international border. A green-coloured train would travel from Sialkot. Earlier it would run up to Jammu, but after Partition, it started terminating at Chak Amru, a small township that could be seen from here. One could see a burst of activity across the border through a pair of binoculars when the train arrived. One day, Robin was at home when Virender had to go for a visit to the posts. When he was about

to leave, Robin showed up, ready in an old jacket and a camouflage cap. Robin coolly announced that he was accompanying his father. Before Virender could say anything, he jumped into the jeep. That day he got to experience it all—watching the soldiers and the border across. Escorted by a soldier, he also climbed up on a watchtower to see the battlefield. He was spellbound.

The biggest worry for Virender was Robin's education. In fact, a year after he was born, Virender had reserved a seat at the Lawrence School, Sanawar, for class six, for the year 1986. But when the time actually came to send him, Tripta wouldn't hear of it. She simply refused to send him to a boarding school away from her. The main issue at Pathankot, too, was the schooling. It didn't have big schools like those in Delhi or other cities. Robin went to Kendriya Vidyalaya IV, Mamoon, which was in the army barracks. However, he was made to switch a short while later and was admitted to St Joseph's Convent, where his mother taught.

One time, a special event was organized by the army—the annual flower and dog show. It drew a lot of people, as quite a few officers and their wives were very passionate about their gardens and many doted on their dogs. Various breeds of dogs were entered into the competition. Robin and his brother registered their dogs as well. The male, called Alca Pone or Alca, was led by Robin and the female, Hirni, was led by Birdie. At the end of the competition, Robin and Alca won a prize. Birdie was seen wailing away because his dog had not won. The situation was brought under control by his father. He feigned surprise and asked, 'Where were you when your name was called out for the prize?' As Birdie looked on, confused by his father's question, Virender rushed inside the tent, got hold of a spare certificate and gave it to Birdie. Much mollified, both brothers went home happily, their arms around each other's necks.

Robin loved his pet dogs. The first thing he did on returning from school was fling his bag on the table and rush to be with the dogs. Only after he had played with them would he settle for lunch. Unfortunately, an epidemic of gastroenteritis broke out and both the dogs died within a month of each other. Virender skirted the issue by telling him that they had fallen ill and had been sent far away by the doctor. Robin was worried. Virender thought he would forget with time, but all hell broke loose on the day he came to know that his pets were no more. He was inconsolable, and Virender was the prime accused. He had never been so heartbroken. After the dachshunds, the Thapars kept a cute Dobermann named Kartoos (after the cartridge of a shotgun), which grew up to be a ferocious dog true to its breed.

Even though Robin was now older, his 'war games' never stopped. They, in fact, became more detailed. On one of their vacations to Delhi, when all the cousins were together, Robin, as expected, suggested they play his favourite game, War-War. This time it was more realistic as they played in the garden and used trees to take cover. The game went on for a bit too long, and when Tonny complained she was tired and hungry, Robin asked her to catch some butterflies, wrap them in grass and eat them. Tonny cringed and refused outright, to which Robin calmly replied, 'A soldier has to eat whatever he gets in the battlefield to stay alive.' Used to such replies by now, she continued to walk on to get something to eat, shouting back, 'I am not a soldier!'

Soon, amid all the fun, Robin grew up and completed his tenth grade. Their time in Pathankot had to end, but this time, since Robin was in high school, his parents had to take into account the future of his schooling before deciding whether the family would join Virender in Rangiya, Assam. It wasn't the best place for higher education.

Virender and Tripta had some tough discussions to make. No family likes to separate, especially one with young boys. It comes with its share of hardships and challenges. However, in the army, this is one decision that is inevitable at some point. Their minds were anxious, their hearts were heavy, but duty called and what was best for the family had to be done. So what

could not be cured had to be endured, and the Thapars were separated yet again.



CHAPTER 8

Pangs of Adolescence

Robin was now in class eleven. He had left his childhood behind and was on the cusp of adulthood. At this important juncture of his life, he had to deal with the absence of the one person he needed the most—his father. He had been his rock and mentor all these years. The next two years were crucial for Robin. He needed to graduate from a good school to have a strong foundation and realize his childhood dream of joining the defence forces. Hence, Virender and Tripta decided that she and the children would shift to Noida, in Uttar Pradesh. Not only did they have a house of their own there, it also offered them more options for the higher education of both the boys.

It was a difficult time for the entire family. They were broken as a unit. Virender would often find himself worrying about them. The thought of Robin coping all alone would consume him.

In spite of the collective turmoil that they were all going through, they had to do what was right. Hence, Tripta and the boys moved, bag and baggage, to Noida. Life in cantonments is very different from life in the city, especially without the logistical support of the army that makes cantonments more comfortable. Noida, at that time, was nothing more than an urban village, which meant a lot more travel on a daily basis.

Fortunately for Tripta, her elder son wasn't a typical teenager. He had a calm demeanour and seldom got into trouble. While other young boys often made many demands of their parents, Robin hardly ever asked for anything. He was compliant and never questioned the decisions of his elders or talked

back to them. Birdie, on the other hand, did a bit of both, but Robin always acted as the mediator.

Both the boys had strong personalities and the difference in their individual traits was quite evident now. While both enjoyed the outdoors thoroughly, they did have different likes and dislikes. Robin was simple and accepting in nature, while Birdie liked asking questions and challenging notions. Birdie was particular and picky about his clothes, whereas Robin would wear whatever his parents would buy for him. Robin was never a topper, while Birdie was quite competitive. However, Robin continued to be the protective sibling, always looking out for his younger brother. He passed on the wisdom that he had gained himself. Realizing his love for the outdoors and adventure early on and his propensity to take risks, Virender had impressed on Robin the need to respect the elements. 'If you abuse them, they will never forgive you,' he had told his son. Virender overheard Robin repeating the same words to Birdie years later. He said, 'Birdie, don't you ever disrespect the elements; if you do, they will never forgive you. See what happened to uncle's son. He jumped out of the boat and drowned.' Birdie enjoyed being taken care of, and even though he was shy to express it, he always appreciated Robin's arm around his shoulder. However, often, he would wonder why his brother was so pliable, never asking questions.

Robin also developed a sense of care and concern for the underprivileged. When they moved to Noida, the brothers started getting Rs 50 as pocket money every month, which they were allowed to spend on themselves without having to ask their parents. Once, Robin ran into a poor beggar on the street right outside their house. Seeing the plight of the old man, he promptly put his hand in his pocket and handed him all his pocket money without giving it a moment's thought, much to the shock of his family. On being asked why he had given it all away, he quietly replied that the old man needed it more than he did. Such generosity from a boy his age was greatly admired, even by his own parents.

Both Robin and Birdie enjoyed watching movies, and no prizes for guessing what their favourite genre was—war films or the ones about defence forces. Hindi movies like *Prahaar* and Hollywood movies like *Top*

Gun fascinated the brothers greatly. Sometimes, when Virender was on leave and in a good mood, he would regale Robin with colourful accounts about life in the army. He would narrate exciting escapades from the National Defence Academy or school or about the mischief he got into as a boy. One such story was about how he had nearly drowned while swimming across a small river in Pune when he was in school. Sometimes Virender would speak about the 1965 skirmishes with the Chinese at Nathu La, in which there had been a few casualties. These would always be met with a barrage of questions from Robin. Once his father told him how he had trained the viewfinder of his sniper rifle on a Chinese soldier's head, contemplating whether to shoot, but had finally decided to not pull the trigger. Robin wanted to know why he had not fired. It was a difficult question to answer and Virender had sidestepped it.

Virender also had plenty of stories about blizzards, snowstorms and being buried under snow, which Robin would lap up with much relish. Whenever Gen Gurbax Singh Sihota, a friend of Virender, would come over to their house, Robin would have questions ready for him too. Of all the stories he would relate, Robin's favourite was the one in which his helicopter was shot at when he was flying near Feni in Bangladesh. The bullet had pierced the fuselage and wounded him in the leg while the fire had continued from the Pakistani troops in the field below. Though he had been in a lot of pain, Gurbax had managed to land the helicopter in an open playground. 'Do you know I was flying with Corps Commander General Sagat Singh? For this I was awarded the Vir Chakra,' he would say coolly to an impressed Robin listening intently. 'What a hero you are, Uncle!' Robin would say, greatly inspired. These storytelling sessions would go on since Gurbax was indulgent with Robin. His own son was about the same age, so he treasured these moments even more. Virender would eventually have to end the conversation.

Tom Cruise, in his striking uniform and aviator glasses, was a big influence in Robin's life. He was a fan of his film, *Top Gun*. His fighter pilot uncle, Wing Commander Anil Thapar, whom he had grown up watching flying airplanes right above their rooftops, was also a role model.

He was impressed not only by his flying but also by his muscular build, because of which he was popularly known as Tarzan in the air force. These factors had convinced Robin that he would become a fighter pilot. On his steel cupboard, he had used oil paints to create the view of the sky from inside a cockpit. He had even recreated the interiors with dials of broken clocks, speedometers and calculator flaps. He would sit on a stool with a hockey stick between his legs and pretend to take off. Sometimes Birdie would take over his 'cockpit' and that would lead to fights between the brothers.

Thus, Robin had his plan for the next two years clearly cut out. He had opted for science and maths after class ten. All he needed to do now was finish high school, take exams for the National Defence Academy and join the academy like his father. He was admitted into Army Public School, Dhaula Kuan, in Delhi.

Unfortunately, within a few days of joining school, Tripta realized that the distance between their house and Robin's school was quite long. The journey back home from school was tiring and didn't leave him with much time or energy to do anything else. He was left with no time to pursue his other interests. Virender would call his family regularly, and he, too, sensed his son's discomfort. He had to leave home really early to be able to get there on time and returned home late in the afternoon. Within two months of joining, it became evident that he needed another arrangement, one where he would not have to compromise on so many precious hours of the day in order to attend his classes.

Once again, his parents were back to the drawing board. This time, Virender came up with another plan. He suggested that Robin shift to another city. His mother stayed in Chandigarh, which was known for some of the best educational institutions. She also had enough experience in handling children his age, since Bonny and Tonny had also stayed with her. In fact, Bonny had gone on to do extremely well academically under her guidance, as she had cleared her entrance examinations for medicine. Convinced that this was the best decision for their son, Virender and Tripta decided to send Robin to Chandigarh for his last two years of school.



CHAPTER 9

The Dark Patch

For a child to live away from one parent is hard enough. Robin, who had always lived with his family, was now going to live in a different city. On top of that, it was happening at an age when he needed their love and support the most to face the pressure and challenges of high school. It was traumatic for all of them. But parents always want the best for their children, so no matter how hard the decision seems, they have to take them to be able to give them the very best within their means. Families of army personnel frequently go through the trauma of separation. Often enough, the service of the nation demands a sacrifice, which they agree to without a moment's thought.

Robin was told about his parents' decision and, being the dutiful child, agreed to it immediately. If he felt any anxiety or panic at the thought of leaving his family behind, he never expressed it. On the contrary, being positive as ever, he chose to focus on the fact that now he would be closer to his beloved cousins.

In Chandigarh, Robin took admission in the reputed DAV College. It was not too far from his grandmother's house. Since his grandfather was staying with his family in Noida due to health reasons, the decision to shift Robin to his grandmother's seemed apt. Not only was it better education-wise, it also meant that they could take care of each other. The arrangement was perfect. He also joined the National Cadet Corps (NCC). This was the first step towards his end goal, and Robin thoroughly enjoyed it. Wearing a uniform and training as a cadet reminded him of his connection to the army.

Life changed completely for Robin now. He had lived with his mother every single day of his life and now her absence left a big void. Tripta had always been indulgent and that was what he was used to. She had never so much as raised her voice at either of her children. She would usually give in to his ways rather than being stern. The fact that he never asked for much anyway made it easier. They had come a long way from dancing to the music of Boney M and ABBA when he was a baby. Now they could understand each other's thoughts without even uttering a word. They shared a special bond, which had only grown stronger over the years. Moving away from each other was heartbreaking. He missed her dearly.

However, it was an important step in the journey to a brighter future, and both Robin and Tripta would remind themselves of it every time the going got tough. Robin's grandmother, whom everyone fondly addressed as 'Mamaji', was his guardian now. Though of Indian origin, her roots were in New Zealand. She was born there and had shifted to India later.

For Mamaji, it was a matter of great pride that her son and daughter-in-law had trusted her with the upbringing of their son. She had raised her daughter's girls as well and was confident of her way. She wanted the children to excel and hence was strict when it came to their education and pushed them to study hard. She belonged to a generation that believed that the answer to a bright future lay only in one's ability to excel academically. Robin was her responsibility now, so she didn't leave any stone unturned in ensuring that he studied hard. Every Sunday, just like she had done with Bonny and Tonny, Robin would be woken up early in the morning. The hearty breakfast the children would be served was quite similar to what Mamaji used to eat when she lived in New Zealand. The lavish spread would include eggs, grilled vegetables, ham, sausages and other cold cuts, along with milk and generously buttered crisp slices of toast. Bonny and Tonny, having grown up in her house, were accustomed to the rule and knew that they had to start studying right after.

However, one shoe doesn't fit all. Robin, who loved his sleep, didn't like being woken up early and fed like a king, and could think of nothing but going right back to bed after. But Mamaji wouldn't have any of it. For her,

the children had to do as they were told and being disciplined was of paramount importance. Needless to say, though everyone had his best interest at heart, the ways of his new household were different from the ones he had left behind. He loved her deeply and did everything he could to avoid disappointing her. As a result, he struggled.

Meanwhile, he was now closer to his favourite cousins and that kept his spirits up. They would often come to visit him and vice versa. Bonny, who was in her first year at medical college, would come from her hostel almost every other week. She would be amused to see her brother get a little conscious about his looks. He had grown up to be a rather handsome boy, blessed with the most expressive sparkling eyes. However, his skin would often break out, thanks to his age, and his hair would never settle down and remain bristly. ‘My hair looks like a porcupine’s’, he would say unhappily. So he would keep looking in the mirror, complaining and fiddling with his hair, while Bonny would look on in amusement. Every once in a while he would complain about his ‘pimply’ skin to her. She would assure him that it made no difference to his otherwise attractive face.

Over the years, they had continued to be each other’s best friends. Now that he was in high school, Robin would often discuss his personal life, telling her all about his friends in school. He had never been the kind to criticize anyone and had always stood up for all his friends. Once, Bonny sat him down and told him how she didn’t approve of one of them as she didn’t think he was good company. He looked at her, bewildered, and went on to tell her how wrong she was. When Bonny protested and asked how he was so sure, he quickly replied, ‘*Usne mere iss pimply chehre pe kiss kiya, tu maan sakti hai* [He kissed this pimply face of mine, can you believe it]?’ Bonny couldn’t help laugh at his simplicity.

While he looked forward to visiting his cousins, what he yearned the most were visits to Noida to meet his mother. Every few months, he would pack his bags, and both Robin and Mamaji would get on a bus to Noida. Once there, he would gorge on his mother’s cooking as she would spoil him silly with his favourite kheer, chocolates and cakes. Other times, his family

would go to visit him in Chandigarh, and both Birdie and he would make several trips to the bakeries in Sector 17 and wolf down pastries and eclairs.

Robin would make it a point to write to his brother regularly. His letters would be full of updates about school and his extended family. Since he had picked up sketching as well, the letters would be made more interesting with doodles of his favourite objects, such as aeroplanes.

In his first year apart, Robin's life revolved mostly around studies, meeting family occasionally and being homesick. He wasn't one to get together with other boys his age and loiter around the city till the wee hours. He was accustomed to following rules and thought such activities were a waste of time. His goal was clear, and he just wanted to keep working towards that. He was determined. While growing up, every time he would get stuck or need guidance, all he had to do was look over his shoulder and his father would be right there to show him the way forward. Unfortunately, that cocoon of love wasn't available to him now. He tried hard, but all the changes around him were cumulatively having an adverse effect on his progress. He finished class eleven, but despite his best efforts, his grades suffered.

Virender, on his trips to Chandigarh, could sense his discomfort. Although Robin would never complain, his father knew his son well and was aware of the heavy price they were paying for their separation. He was not around to comfort and support his son at this crucial time in his life, and that ate away at him. He made sure to be in touch with him. In fact, he would regularly travel 80 kilometres, from Rangiya to Guwahati and back, just to speak to Robin on the phone, as there were no PCOs at his place of posting.

After living like this for a year, Virender realized that there was no way that the distance between them could be bridged, and Robin needed a change. He was to appear for the entrance exam of NDA soon, and Virender knew he would make it if he was given proper guidance. Though all he needed was his father's counselling, the remoteness of the posting made it impossible. Thus, Tripta and Virender decided to shift Robin one more time, to the nearby city of Panchkula, where his aunt Geeta stayed with her

family. They thought the company of other children would help him settle better. Also, they had a dog in their house, and Robin really loved dogs, so they thought it would lift his mood.

Geeta stayed in a huge palatial bungalow with her husband and five children. She had three daughters and two sons. Bonny (her eldest) had shifted out to a hostel but since it was close by, in the state of Punjab, she visited them often. They had a domestic help named Jackie, and a Dobermann named Dingo.

Needless to say, the house was always buzzing with activity. Tonny, the eldest of the children in the house after Bonny, was rarely a part of the huddle that created a ruckus on most days. But she was the closest to Robin in the house, as they had spent most of their childhood together. The brother-sister duo could often be seen indulging in friendly banter as Robin enjoyed pulling her leg, an old habit.

Geeta as a guardian was exactly the opposite of her mother. She was gentle and soft-spoken and her main focus was on feeding the children well and taking care of their needs. As Robin would often say, she would either be in the kitchen cooking chicken or taking care of the children. With so many of them in the house, it was a fair assumption that she was doing one of these things at any given point.

Here, Robin would wake up early in the morning and be the first to come down for breakfast. He would then bang his plate with a spoon, asking for food. The staple breakfast of Geeta's kitchen was stuffed parathas. Robin would be the first to eat his breakfast of two parathas, curd and tea. During their morning conversations in the kitchen, Geeta would often implore him to study hard. To which he would always reply, 'I love my country.' She would try and ask him what that had to do with anything, but he would just smile and go about his day. He would go back to his room right after breakfast and take a nap. When woken up, he would innocently smile and say, '*Jhapki lag gayi thi* [I snoozed off].'

She would lovingly plead with him, '*Veh puta* [dear son], please solve your maths problems.' Since childhood, his father would sit across the table when he studied. This had become a habit that was hard to break. Hence, he

would struggle and run away on some errand or the other. Maths had never been his cup of tea. His interest lay elsewhere. He loved collecting manuals of aeroplanes and technical pamphlets of specifications of fighters. He lived in a world of his own dreams. His studies suffered as a result.

Even though the atmosphere was lighter and more fun at his aunt's, it didn't weaken his resolve. He continued to be clear about his end goal. One day, out of the blue, he walked up to his aunt and asked, '*Bua*, do you think I will ever get a bravery award?' She ruffled his hair fondly and said, 'Of course, son, you will win many awards.' To which he said, 'Right. I may even get a posthumous one.' These unexpected statements from him at such a young age troubled his aunt, and she told him to not think or say such things.

Meanwhile, the seriousness of his purpose started reflecting in his words and actions as well. He would often use words and phrases that he had grown up listening to, from his father or his colleagues. For example, 'don't worry' was replaced by 'everything is under control', 'it is done' was replaced by 'mission accomplished', etc. Often, when Tonny would remind him to do his homework, she would be given the same answer as her mother, 'I love my country.' Tonny would roll her eyes and say, 'Sure, your country will help you pass too, right?' He would laugh playfully at that. Tonny was more accustomed to his abrupt patriotic statements, since she had been around him more than the others in the house. So she wouldn't be as surprised as, say, his aunt Geeta.

One night, they both walked to the kitchen to get something from the refrigerator to satiate their midnight hunger pangs. When he opened the door of the refrigerator, he found a bottle of rum. Picking it up swiftly, he uncapped it and took a sip. She was shocked! Robin had never had a drink in his life. What was he doing? As she looked at him, gesturing to ask what he thought he was doing, he raised his hand calmly to stop her and said, '*Pagal, fauji banna hai mujhe. Aadat to daalni padegi* [I have to become an army officer, silly. I have to get used to it].' This was perhaps the second time in her life that Tonny was so taken aback by Robin's actions. This boy ate, slept and breathed his aspiration.

In the meantime, 'War-War' continued well into adulthood. Only this time, his companion was Jackie. Robin shared a special bond with him. Jackie, too, was very fond of him. So, once the work around the house was done and Robin, too, could take a break, they would climb up to the roof. Since parts of it were under construction, it made for the perfect battlefield for their game. They would hold one half of a coconut shell each over their ears, using them as walkie-talkies, and give instructions to each other from opposite ends of the 'battlefield'. Every now and then, MiGs from the Chandigarh airbase would whoosh over their heads and they would fire at them from the rooftop. They would even paint their faces. They would play this game for hours without getting bored even for a second.

There was another development in Geeta's family during this time. Tonny got engaged. She was in the last year of college when she received a matrimonial offer from a good and respectable family. Hence, it was decided that she would be wedded soon after she completed her graduation. Her fiancé belonged to a small town near Chandigarh called Gobindgarh. To her dismay, Robin wouldn't leave any opportunity to remind and tease her, saying she was going to live in a village soon. Luckily for her, after a few days, she, too, got a reason to tease him. One day, when she was coming home from college on her scooty, she ran into him wandering the lanes around their house. When she asked what he was doing there all by himself, he went on to shyly tell her that there was a pretty girl who reminded him of his beautiful mother and that he had a crush on her. The simple boy that he was, he would go around her house to simply catch a glimpse and return home without even striking up a conversation.

With so many people living together, mostly young boys, Geeta's house would mostly be in a state of mess. Hence, Tonny, who was now in her courtship period and would usually meet her fiancé over the weekends, would always be conscious of him coming over and finding it so cluttered. As soon as she would get to know of his plans to visit the house, she would call her family members and ask them to clean it up.

Robin took great pleasure in the activities following her phone calls. The family had met her fiancé and greatly admired his soft physical features as opposed to those of big and burly Punjabi men. Not one to let go of an opportunity to tease Tonny, Robin made up a nickname for her fiancé. To her annoyance, he would jokingly call him 'Mr Softy'! The landline was in Robin's room, so every time she called, he would be the one to answer. After the call, he would announce to everyone in the house in a loud voice, 'Mr Softy is on his way. Operation Safai starts!' These announcements had become a regular feature and everyone would jump into action like a well-oiled machine. Things would be put away in their respective places, tables and shelves would be dusted off, covers would be changed and Robin would be sent to get goodies from the nearby market. The menu would include their favourite snacks, like kaju katli and samosas. Everyone would be on their best behaviour in front of their future brother-in-law. But the minute he would leave, the children would get busy enjoying the goodies and teasing Tonny. Robin would often don the hat of the entertainer of the group, and the evening would pass in fun and laughter.

This was exactly what Robin wanted for his loved ones. As long as he could help it, he wanted his near and dear ones to be enveloped in love and joy. He rarely ever got upset and even when he did, he never shared it with anyone for the fear of making them sad as well.

The year 1994 ended with much loved and cherished memories. Vijyant also got an opportunity to be with his father for five days. The commanding officer of the Engineers (Riverine) Regiment, a friend of Virender, offered his sparkling motor yacht. So they set off on it for a cruise on the mighty Brahmaputra. Robin would sit on the fore bridge for hours, enjoying the sight of river dolphins leaping about, the wide expanse of water and the hills in the distance. During this trip, he also got a chance to meet Col K.S. Chandpuri, the hero of the Battle of Longewala. Robin even went to his unit and had the chance to fire a light machine gun (LMG) and machine carbine. But the short break was over soon, and he headed back to Panchkula and his books. School was coming to an end. He was to take his entrance exams soon and move back to Noida.



CHAPTER 10

The Hurt

Robin was about to take the most important exam of his life so far. He was nervous but he knew he had to give it his best irrespective, so he went ahead and took it calmly and confidently.

Once all the exams were over, it was time for Robin to rejoin his family in Noida. Unfortunately, Virender was still away on posting and would only meet them during his leave. Tripta taught in a school now and Birdie studied in Army Public School, Noida. He had adjusted well to the metropolitan culture of the city. Now an adolescent, he had his own set of friends and kept busy with studies and other activities. Their grandfather lived with them in Noida as well, and Robin enjoyed spending time with him, listening to all his stories for hours together. Robin took such great interest in the stories that his grandfather would often add his own bits, just to make Robin happy. Sometimes stories of his great-grandfather would also be included.

One of his favourite stories was: ‘When we were in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), a sniper took careful aim and fired at the head of a soldier. At that precise moment, the soldier yawned and the bullet went through without any harm except two small holes in his cheeks, which healed quickly.’ There was another one about a scared paratrooper who had refused to jump. He was made to stand in the doorway of the plane to watch the sky, eventually earning a kick on his butt. And out he went, along with his fear.

Kartoos (the Dobermann) would be an active part of their pack as well, and it was a common sight to see all three of them out in the small lawn in

front of their house, sprawled on the grass, enjoying the warm winter sun.

Robin shared a unique relationship with his grandfather. They had two generations between them but that never stopped them from enjoying each other's company thoroughly. Robin never tired of listening to him and his grandfather never tired of talking to him. Boys rarely ever found any joy in the company of people his grandfather's age, but Robin was different. He would also make sure to take care of and serve him every chance he got, despite there being others to do it for him.

Robin would often carry his grandfather in his arms to wherever he wanted to go in the house, including the washroom. Once, when he got really sick and had to be taken to the hospital, Robin went along with his mother and aunt. Due to age and illness, he had very little control over his bowel movements. As a result, he soiled the bathroom floor of the hospital. Robin insisted on cleaning it himself, despite hospital staff being available to do so. To the surprise of his mother and aunt, there was not even a hint of disgust on his face. This was his grandfather, and he wanted to take care of him in every way possible.

Around the same time, in Chandigarh, preparations for Tonny's wedding were underway. As Robin was fairly free at this time, it was decided that he would go for it with his mother. Robin was thrilled to be able to attend his dear cousin's wedding. Until then, he had never participated in a family function, and hence was very excited. On the wedding day, there was an atmosphere of festive cheer. Robin decided to go and check on his sister before she came down for the ceremonies. The function was to take place in a large Dussehra ground. When Robin saw Tonny, he gave her a smile and said, 'The Ramlila is about to begin!' He wasn't going to let go of a chance to annoy her even now! She looked beautiful in her bridal finery as she smiled back at her cousin, hiding her nervousness.

In all the pictures of the grand event, Robin could be seen smiling and thoroughly enjoying himself. He participated in all the big and small rituals with great enthusiasm. Soon, it was time for Tonny to take leave of her family. Everybody gathered around the couple to bid them adieu with tears in their eyes. Just then, Robin took a quiet step towards Tonny and bent

down to whisper in her ear, 'Commando march!' Caught off guard, Tonny couldn't hold back and burst into laughter. The moment was captured, and for years Tonny was teased by her family members about how happy she had been to leave them and go to her husband's house, all thanks to Robin.

Once the functions were over, Tripta and Robin returned to Noida. A few weeks later, the morning newspaper arrived at their doorstep, bearing his NDA result. Robin took the paper and scanned the list of the candidates with nervous excitement. After going through it twice, he folded it neatly and kept it aside. His worst nightmare had come true. He hadn't made it. The nervous excitement gave way to confusion, which turned into a heavy sense of loss, weighing him down miserably. Never one to have dramatic reactions, he quietly got up, went to his room and locked himself in. He had to give it some time to sink in. How could he have not made it? Had he not prepared enough? In his heart, he had been preparing for this one thing longer than he could remember. How, then, was his name not on that list?

Birdie felt bad for his brother, but couldn't do much about it. He realized that Robin did not want to talk, so he left him alone. Virender was told over the phone and he, too, was taken aback. He always knew that his absence had affected Robin's academic progress, but it didn't quite make up for the disappointment he felt for his son. This was sure to damage his son's self-confidence and that worried him. Perhaps the only person to have an objective view of the situation was Tripta. That helped, since she was the only one Robin could open up to.

Thus, when a sad and dejected Robin turned to her to share his emotions and agony, she knew exactly how to handle it. First and foremost, she needed to make sure that he didn't go into a shell. Not only did he feel that his dreams had been shattered, he also felt that he had let his father down. Tripta consoled him, telling him how success and failure were part of life, and urged him to take them in his stride. She also brought to rest his apprehensions about his father. He was their son and they loved him dearly. The result of an exam couldn't change that. Her words were soothing and relaxed Robin somewhat. He agreed with her, but, in the same breath, also promised that this was not the end and that he would take the exam again—

this time with better preparation. However, Tripta asked him to slow down. Running a loving hand through his hair, she said, 'There is no hurry, my son. Why don't you finish your graduation first and then take your exams for the IMA? Meanwhile, you could spend some more time with us. You have been away for so long. There is no reason to get into the race just yet. Stay with us, finish your graduation and then try for the academy again.'

Robin agreed, no questions asked. The failure, however, continued to haunt him but he slowly started to come to terms with it. He decided he would do what was asked of him now, but would eventually fulfil his wish of wearing the uniform. Only this time, he would leave no scope for failure. The result had hit him hard, but he was not going to let it determine his destiny. He was going to use it to fuel his drive. In a letter to Bonny, he wrote that the greatest benefit of facing failures early in life was that one could learn from them, and he was going to do just that. Thus, strengthening his resolve to overcome his weakness with hard work, he set out on his journey once again. This time with more determination and vigour.

It was decided that he would take admission in Khalsa College of Delhi University to get an honours degree in BCom. However, by the time he applied, all seats were already taken. The principal, though, assured him that he would be informed as soon as a seat became available. So, in the meantime, he took admission in the evening classes. In addition to that, he joined the NCC again and continued to work earnestly on his training.

Even before college began, Robin joined tuition classes near his house for economics. He wanted to do everything to stay ahead. The classes used to take place at 7.30 p.m. in a large bungalow that had been converted into a tuition centre. A family of four, a middle-aged couple with their young son and daughter, ran the centre, holding classes for students in batches.

On his first day, not wanting to be late, Robin reached the centre well before time, around 7 p.m. He still hadn't made many friends in Noida. So he mostly kept to himself. Besides, he wasn't too interested in befriending a lot of people, since he felt it would distract him. While waiting, he saw

another boy of his age, standing alone. Robin turned to him and asked, 'Hey! Are you new here?', to which the boy nodded.

'I just wanted to figure out if this is a good place to take economics classes,' Robin said.

'I don't really know because this is my first day as well,' came the reply.

'Ah, okay. I am Robin,' he said, extending his hand.

'I am Hemant,' the boy replied, shaking Robin's hand.

'So you are a Khalsa [a Sikh]?' Robin asked with confidence as if he already knew.

'Why yes! How did you know?' Hemant asked, as he didn't sport a turban and was confused about what had given it away.

'Well, I can make out,' Robin said with a twinkle in his eye. That made Hemant smile. He liked that Robin was direct. Both the boys were unaware that this was the start of a deep friendship that would last a lifetime.

Within the next few minutes, they also found out that they were both children of serving army officers and were about to go to the same college for the same course. Interestingly, what they didn't know at the time was that Hemant's father had been Virender's instructor in the junior command course in Mhow.

They didn't even live too far away from each other. So they started going to the tuition centre together. Robin had a great sense of humour, and Hemant could never get enough of his satirical jokes. Robin would often crack them during class and Hemant would have a tough time keeping a straight face. Hemant, too, would have Robin in splits with his mimicry, especially of their tuition teacher. Often enough, they would just look at each other and burst out laughing.

They, however, did not stay too long at that tuition centre. The man who owned it had a rather poor reputation. Though he was a good teacher, there were rumours that he often misbehaved and made the girls in his class uncomfortable, especially if he ever caught them alone. One evening, towards the end of a class, around 8.30–9 p.m., just when all the students were getting restless and hungry, a group of people barged in with one of the female students in tow. They were all angry and began hurling abuses at

the daughter of the owner, who was teaching this particular class. It turned out that they were the girl's family members.

'Where is that guy? Get him out right now. How dare he touch my daughter!' the father of the girl shouted angrily.

The owner came in nervously and asked, 'What's the problem?'

The father turned to him immediately and, without answering his question, slapped him five to six times across his face, right in front of about seventy people.

His wife came running when she heard the commotion. The people present didn't seem surprised by the accusations, though. The man was of questionable character and it was an open secret. The slaps, however, did stun everyone, including the recipient.

'Last night, you touched my daughter and made her uncomfortable. I can't believe there are beasts like you in our society!' the father said, glaring at the owner.

'I knew this was going to happen,' Robin whispered in Hemant's ear. 'Bhai, stay quiet or we will also get slapped,' Hemant said nervously. The owner, though meekly, was still trying to defend himself by denying the accusation. This angered the girl's father even more and he slapped him once again. Then, in a fit of rage, he grabbed the hand of the owner's daughter and said, 'She is going to come with me now. I will drop her off in the morning. Let us see how you feel about that.'

Sure enough, the trick worked and the owner broke out in a cold sweat. He cried out and said, 'I am very sorry, please don't do this. I beg of you.' The other men accompanying the father caught the owner by his arm. His wife started crying and his son and daughter looked on, scared, but the air was so tense that no one dared to do anything.

Just then, Hemant stood up and said, 'Sir, please don't do this. It is not her fault, don't take her.' Robin, the more mature of the two, tried to stop him but it was too late. So, he stood up as well and said, 'Sir, you can go ahead and slap him [the owner] as many times as you want. But don't take her away. She is innocent.'

The father almost smiled at their innocence, then cursed them under his breath and asked, 'Who the hell are you?'

Robin said, 'Sir, we are nobodies. Just students. But we can't let something bad happen to an innocent person like this. His daughter is innocent. Why punish her?'

'Papa, please don't,' said his seventeen-year-old daughter as well.

'I will talk to the police, and none of you, especially the girls, should attend these classes,' the man said finally and walked out with his entourage. Everyone heaved a sigh of relief and quietly left the room, but not without shooting disgusted glances at the owner.

Robin had lost all respect for the man. He couldn't be his student any more. Hemant agreed with him, and they both decided to quit the classes. The plan was to study on their own. Robin was more driven than ever before. It wasn't easy but his focus was singular and sharp. Hence, he adopted a new strict regime.

To join the defence forces, one doesn't only have to clear a written exam but also be physically and mentally fit. Robin was determined to not leave any scope for failure this time. Even though he loved his sleep, he pushed himself to start waking up as early as 5 a.m. every day. He would then get on his cycle and reach Hemant's house. He would park his cycle right below his window and scream, '*Uth, khalse, uth* [Wake up]!' Putting his pillow away grudgingly, Hemant would wake up, freshen up and join him. Then they would go back to Robin's house to leave the cycle and set out on a walk. They would walk till Atta Market, breaking into a run thereafter. After covering about 5–7 kilometres, they would reach their destination—the beautiful rose garden near Mayur Vihar. Here they would spend another hour or so, exercising in the fresh air. On their way back, they would stop at a Shiv mandir in Sector 18, where they would take off their T-shirts and meditate for a few minutes. They both had deep faith in the Almighty and would do this sincerely. The priest at the temple was taken aback at the earnestness of such young boys. He didn't hide his admiration from them and would often tell them how he would give their example to the others visiting the temple. On their way back, Robin would make Hemant laugh

by mimicking the priest's thick accent and telling him how he really wanted to learn to talk like him!

Robin's house would come first, so Hemant would proceed to his house alone. After a bit of rest, followed by a shower and breakfast, they would meet again around 11 a.m. Hemant's father had a small apartment near Robin's house that he used as an office. The office had an AC, which, in those days, was a luxury. The boys were allowed to use the space along with the AC if they promised that they would spend their time only studying. They agreed, as they had no intention of doing anything else in that time. So they would spend a few hours there every day, only to break for lunch, which would come from one of their houses. This would go on till 3.30 p.m., after which they would set out to repeat their morning routine. They would be back by 7 p.m., exhausted. As soon as the clock struck 9, when people their age would be getting ready to step out for a night of fun and party, they would flop down on their beds and snooze away to glory.

It wouldn't be wrong to say that for close to three years, Robin and Hemant were joined at the hip. They were particular about their studies and routine, but this didn't mean that the time they spent together was boring. They were still regular boys, who were full of life and knew how to enjoy themselves. However, they did not derive happiness from the same things as their peers. They looked to simpler things in life.

Robin had stayed in many different cities growing up, so he didn't have many friends other than Hemant. However, Hemant had done his schooling from Mount Saint Mary's in Delhi Cantonment, so he had other friends but preferred to spend most of his time with Robin. He would often talk about his cousin's friend, Divya, whom he had a crush on. He had even shown Robin a hazy photograph of hers, in which she was sitting surrounded by a few others. Realizing how much Hemant liked her, Robin would often encourage him to speak to her and tell her how he felt. But Hemant was too shy, and Robin would tease him about it.

The first time there was a short pause in their routine was when Robin had to take a trip to Kasauli for three to four days. Hemant missed him a lot during this time. He missed their regime too. As expected, the day he returned, Robin came straight to meet him. A restless Hemant was relieved to finally see his friend after four long days. Robin was excited as well, but for a different reason altogether.

‘Man, you should’ve either taken me along or come back sooner,’ Hemant complained.

‘You would never believe whom I met there, Khalse!’ Robin said impatiently.

‘Nana Patekar?’ guessed Hemant, since he was his favourite actor.

‘No, you fool. I met Divya!’ Robin exclaimed.

‘What? How can that be? You have never even seen her. How did you know it was her?’ said a confused Hemant.

‘You are right, but I did recognize her and spoke to her as well. I told her that I was your friend,’ Robin said with a sense of achievement, folding his arms in front of his chest.

Hemant still thought Robin was pulling his leg. He couldn’t wrap his head around how he had recognized someone he had only heard of and never seen, except in an old and blurred photograph. But Robin was sharp. He had indeed met and identified Divya. Usually, women feel uncomfortable when approached by an unknown man, but Robin had an inherently honest demeanour that made the other person assume that he had good intentions.

Now that he had made friends with Divya, Robin decided to take matters into his own hands and started tutoring Hemant on how he could befriend her and eventually confess his feelings. Robin took on the role of director of his friend’s love story: He pushed Hemant to start playing tennis in the morning just because she did and to go for the movies she was going to. Hemant protested against the tennis. He said that the morning run with Robin sapped all his energy. But Robin would hear none of it and even loaned him an old wooden tennis racquet to motivate him. Robin also managed to get Divya’s phone number and pushed him to call her. But

Hemant became tongue-tied when he finally did. So the next time, Robin wrote prompts on a piece of paper to make it easier for him to make conversation. When that didn't work, Robin mouthed the words. But it confused Hemant, who said, '*Hain? Kya bola* [What? What did you say]?' The call ended with Robin facepalming and asking Hemant to just hang up.

But Robin wasn't going to give up and constantly looked for ways to help his friend take his story forward. One day, while they were studying at the office, a salesman knocked on the door. He was selling imported radio sets, complete with antennae and headphones. Robin asked him about the source of the radios. The man revealed that he was Robin's uncle's employee, who had recently returned from New Zealand. He was since trying to set up a business, trading in imported electronic goods. This gave Robin an idea.

Armed with one of the radio sets and with Hemant in tow, Robin arrived below Divya's apartment. He handed the set to Hemant and asked him to try and sell it to her. He believed that this was the best opportunity for his friend to speak to her. But Hemant refused to climb up the stairs. He had fumbled even when trying to speak to Divya on the phone, so how would he talk to her in person and that, too, alone? Regardless, Robin went with the plan, hoping Hemant would trail him. However, Hemant remained downstairs while Robin climbed up the stairs, found out that Divya wasn't at home, met and spoke with her father and returned. Seeing the radio set still in his hand, Hemant asked, 'What happened?'

'*Bhai, maine uske ghar ka paani peeya! Kaash main tere liye la pata* [Brother, I had water at her house. I wish I could get you some],' Robin said with a mischievous grin as he patted Hemant's shoulder in mock sympathy. Hemant shook his head in dismay when he realized his friend was teasing him. But it was Robin, and he could get away with anything.

Between their preparations and shenanigans, days were whizzing past. At this point in life, Robin was happy. He had found the path that would lead him to success and a friend to share everything with. He had no reason to complain.



CHAPTER 11

The Transformation

In the summer of 1995, Robin's grandfather's health began to deteriorate. He continued to stay in Noida with his son's family, but had become frail and was completely dependent on them for all his needs. In August, Virender came home on leave. Tripta and he would step out once in a while for social commitments. One night, as they were leaving for a get-together, organized for all the officers of Virender's regiment, his father asked him to move him to his bedroom from the drawing room, where he had been watching television. Virender picked him up and settled him comfortably on his bed before stepping out.

The next morning, when Robin went to his room to bid him goodbye before going out for his run, his grandfather didn't reply. So he stepped closer and tried to wake him up. A chill ran down Robin's spine when he placed his hand on his—it was icy cold. His grandfather had passed away in his sleep.

The death of his grandfather had a profound effect on Robin. He expressed his grief by crying and hugging him before he was taken to the funeral ground, but on the inside, he was going through much more. He watched from a distance as his grandfather's body was placed on the pyre. After it was lit, he took off his shirt and threw it in the fire. Did he want his grandfather to have something of his on his last journey? Nobody sought an explanation and Robin didn't give one either. On reaching home, Robin brought out an old album. He took out his grandfather's photograph and, on the back of it, he wrote, 'Today it was you, Grandpa. Tomorrow it will be

me.’ The certainty of death had become more real to him. ‘Death will come to all of us,’ he would say.

Perhaps Robin’s spiritual journey began after witnessing the death of someone he was so attached to. His goals and his efforts to achieve them remained the same but his vision towards life evolved. He started discussing the possibility of death with his friends. He would have recurring dreams about his grandfather and would often discuss these with Hemant. One day, when they were talking about life and death, Hemant mentioned a saint, Yogi Baba, whom his family had been visiting for years and whose presence filled him with immense peace. Robin was intrigued and asked Hemant if he could come along the next time his family went to meet the saint.

Yogi Baba was a learned man, who lived frugally with a family in South Extension, Delhi. Robin became a regular at his house. He was drawn to his divine energy and liked listening to his sermons. One day, while talking to them about physical bodies, Yogi Baba said, ‘What people put in their bodies influences their thoughts, eventually shaping their character.’ His words hit home. That day, Robin and Hemant took an oath to never eat non-vegetarian food or drink alcohol. At the young age of eighteen, Robin unflinchingly gave up something he had relished all his life. After that day, in spite of his father telling him that his body needed the nourishment of meat, Robin upheld his oath. He wasn’t just physically strong, he was also iron-willed.

As time passed, Robin started making new friends. Once in a while, Hemant would introduce him to new people—mostly friends he had grown up with. Robin made quite an impression on people; they were drawn to his endearing personality. At times, Robin and Hemant would get invited to parties as well. Usually, since their routine didn’t allow them to indulge, they would give such invitations a miss, but sometimes, when they particularly liked someone, they would make an exception. So, when Hemant’s friend Ghalib, who had met Robin a few times and had grown

extremely fond of him, invited them to his lavish birthday party, they decided to go. Most people at the party were bingeing on alcohol and cigarettes, but Hemant and Robin decided to stay away and spent the evening by themselves. They later joked about being ‘misfits’ in these circles, since they didn’t even feel tempted to follow suit.

The same would happen at Birdie’s birthday parties as well. There was a contrast between the personalities of the brothers. Robin only wanted to concentrate on his preparations and usually kept all distractions at bay. Birdie, on the other hand, did a little of both. He studied but also spent time with friends. Robin had always felt a little shy in the company of girls but Birdie was the exact opposite. Once, Birdie decided to throw a party at home to celebrate his birthday. All his friends were invited and, soon, the house was swarming with girls. Hemant teased Robin for many days after that, saying, ‘Man . . . why don’t you learn something from your younger brother? You are useless!’

‘Says the guy who failed to even hold a decent conversation with the girl he liked,’ Robin would shoot right back.

A few months later, when Robin and Hemant were out on their morning run, they met another boy their age. After a short conversation, they found out that his name was Rajesh Makkar and he was also a student of Delhi University, but was in a different college and course than them. He, too, was the son of a third-generation army officer like Robin and wanted to join the forces.

It was 1995, and they had a year to take the Combined Defence Services (CDS) examination. For admission to the IMA, one has to be a graduate. However, if a person has appeared for their graduation finals but the results have not been declared, they are given provisional permission contingent on the result. So there was enough time for them to prepare for the examination and finish their graduation as well. Robin joined a coaching class to prepare for the Services Selection Board (SSB) process.

Both Robin and Hemant wanted to be pilots, but Hemant didn’t necessarily want to join the forces. He, too, was working hard like Robin, but not just for the CDS. He was taking the exam only because of Robin.

He was open to other options as well, unlike Robin, who was clear about joining the army. Rajesh, or 'Mac', as Robin called him, too had his heart set on the forces. Thus, he became the new member of their group. He would slack at times, but Robin would push him to study harder.

Robin, Hemant and Mac stuck to the daily routine of their morning and evening runs, and eventually made friends with a few other boys as well. The group kept growing bigger as more and more people joined in. One of the boys, Joshi, whom everyone called Jo, was a gym enthusiast. After speaking to him, Robin developed an interest in bodybuilding. Soon the group was christened 'TGs', which stood for 'tough guys'. The members also got name plates made with the abbreviation on them. Four out of the group finally made it to the IMA.

Robin was regular with his workouts and the effort had started to show results. He would often flex his biceps and ask his mother to touch them. She would always smile appreciatively. His peers greatly admired his humbleness and dedication towards his goal. Neighbourhood kids would observe him during his runs and workouts, and try to emulate him.

The exam was edging closer and the dynamics with his friends were changing, since he was spending more time with Mac and less with Hemant, but the one thing that remained constant was his unshakeable commitment to his goal. His friends often marvelled at the fact that he feared only one thing: not being able to achieve his objective. Robin admired all war heroes but was particularly inspired by the stories of young men who had sacrificed their lives in the service of the motherland. His favourite was the brave freedom fighter Bhagat Singh.

Coincidentally, Hemant's father, Maj Gen R.P. Singh, hailed from the same village as Bhagat Singh. Whenever Robin would visit when Hemant's father was home, the three of them would sit in the drawing room and Maj Gen Singh would hold court, entertaining the boys with stories about the freedom fighter. He often began, 'He [Bhagat Singh] was always different. Unique. He was well educated and his family could easily afford to send him to Europe, where he could get himself a good job, earn a lot of money and lead a cosy life. But he refused.'

Robin listened in rapt attention. ‘Once a jailer asked Bhagat Singh, “What is wrong with you? You are young and educated. Don’t you worry about your parents? Don’t you want to get married?”

‘Bhagat Singh replied in a soft voice, contrary to how he always spoke, “Of course I do. I have the same wishes as any young man my age. Do you believe I don’t think of my mother, my family or of getting married? Jailer Sahib, my heart cries for my mother. When I think of her face, it makes me miserable. But I am doing this for my country. We chose our country. You didn’t, and that is the only difference.”

‘Tears stung the jailer’s eyes. This was the same Bhagat Singh who had earned a bad reputation for being hot-blooded and violent. How could this sincere, emotional manner belong to the same person?’ said Maj Gen Singh, finishing his story.

Robin was quiet. He was deep in thought. What were these young men made of? What drove them to such fearless determination? These stories stayed with him and only strengthened his resolve to follow in their footsteps and serve his motherland. He would doodle in his diary and write things like, ‘Someone will have to die for the nation; why can’t that someone be me?’

The exam was now only a few months away. Robin was more focused than ever before, and made sure his friends, especially Mac, didn’t get distracted and studied hard. They even took him to meet Yogi Baba and encouraged him to follow his teachings like they had. However, Mac could not give up non-vegetarian food. He couldn’t be blamed. He was a normal eighteen-year-old who couldn’t be expected to make such big changes to his lifestyle.

Robin was an exception. He had better understanding of his goals and future as compared to his peers, who were still confused about where life was taking them. He had what it took to be successful. He wasn’t just likeable, his personality and mannerisms inspired people to follow in his footsteps. It was easy for people to forget that he was just a young boy, with quirks of his own.

Both Hemant and Robin's fathers wanted their sons to focus on their studies and had become quite strict. So the two boys used code names as discreet references to their fathers. Hemant's father was named 'Tiger 1', Robin's father 'Tiger 2'!

Both boys were obsessed with aeroplanes, and they also used the names of different birds as codes for the aeroplanes, confusing anyone within earshot. So when they found out about an upcoming air show at the Hindon Air Force Station, they knew they couldn't miss it. But they also knew that the tigers would never grant them permission. However, missing it was not an option, so they decided to play it by ear.

They woke up early on the day of the air show and, instead of going for their morning run, stood on the main road that led to the Hindon station. After a while, the staff car of an air force officer appeared, going in the direction of the station, which they hailed. To their delight, the car stopped, and when they asked for a lift, the officer, who was travelling with his wife, agreed to take them along.

On the way, the officer asked if they had passes for the show. They did not. 'In that case, we will drop you kids at the gate,' the officer said.

The two boys disembarked at the gate and looked disappointedly at the rear of the car as it headed into the base. They walked to the side of the road, sulking as they looked inside the base and saw the huge crowd that was blocking the show from their view. Hemant was ready to give up and watch whatever they could from outside, when Robin tapped on his shoulder.

'Do you see that? We can climb right to the top,' Robin said, pointing to the water tank just outside the gate and looming over it.

'Are you crazy, Robin? Have you seen its size? We can't climb that, it is like a hill, only steeper. The ladder doesn't even have support rails,' said Hemant, dismissing his suggestion.

'I want to climb it to watch the show. Just imagine the view from the top,' said Robin, with a note of irritation in his voice.

'Sure, we will get the best view, but we will also fall down and die!' said an annoyed Hemant.

The argument went on for a bit. Robin was sure that he wanted to climb up the tank, while Hemant pleaded with him to be sensible. Finally, Robin said he would go ahead by himself and told Hemant that he needn't follow.

‘Robin, that’s wrong. I will never speak to you again,’ called out a helpless Hemant as Robin turned to walk away. Hemant followed him and tried to hold him back, saying, ‘Please, Robin, for God’s sake, don’t!’

Robin walked on anyway, knowing very well that Hemant was bound to follow. He was right. So the two of them started the long, steep climb together, a step at a time. Hemant prayed under his breath all the way up.

It took them a good twenty-five minutes to reach the last step. There was considerable distance between it and the platform that they had to get on top of to get a clear view into the station. To make matters worse, there was a giant beehive next to the ladder. They spotted it only when they had made it to that last step and almost simultaneously exclaimed, ‘Oh no!’

Climbing back down was not an option, so Robin took a deep breath and leapt as far as he could. He turned around to help Hemant up to the perch. Finally, they had made it to the top!

Hemant was grumbling and catching his breath at the same time, ready to give Robin an earful, when he caught the view behind his friend and stopped in his tracks. It was breathtaking. They sat down on the platform and watched the entire show. It was literally a ‘bird’s-eye view’, a sight they had never seen before. The expanse of the runway and the different aircraft, such as the MiGs, the Sukhois and the Jaguars, the crowd—it was all clearly visible. So high were their seats that while landing, all the aircraft were at their eye level for a brief moment, allowing the boys to give a thumbs up to the pilots directly. Robin had been right, after all. Every time they had felt tired during the precarious climb, Robin had pushed his friend by saying, ‘Just a little bit more.’

Hemant never forgot that day. Every time he was stuck or tired during a task, he would think of that day, how tired he had felt and how all he could see was Robin’s shoe, acting as a guide to the top. He would remind himself that just like that day, if he managed to keep going, he would find success

and happiness, no matter what. In some surreal way, Robin had managed to teach that lesson to him at the tender age of nineteen.

Months went by, and in January 1997, it was time for Robin to take the CDS exam. He had worked hard, steadily and sincerely. The time to put all his effort into action had arrived. He got dressed, prayed to the Almighty and left for his examination centre with Hemant in tow. Hemant did not feel as confident, but on Robin's insistence, he tagged along. Upon reaching the centre, both friends hugged each other as Robin went in, while Hemant decided not to sit for the exam. As Robin solved the paper, Hemant strolled around the nearby Connaught Place, waiting for him to finish. He knew in his heart that Robin was going to clear the exam with flying colours, and soon they would grow apart. He also knew that no one deserved to make it more than his zealous friend.

A few weeks later, the results were out and Robin had successfully cleared the exam in his first attempt! However, once bitten, twice shy, he went all the way to the UPSC office to double-check his name. He wasn't alone; thanks to his perseverance, Mac, too, had cleared the written papers. Robin had never been happier. Virender shared his happiness. He had made it all on his own. The SSB was next, but Robin's achievement could not be denied. He, however, decided to delay celebrations until he had cleared all the stages.



CHAPTER 12

The Breakthrough

Virender was very proud of his son. The last three years had pushed him to accept and deal with many changes in his life, but he had conquered them in style. It seemed like all these years had passed in the blink of an eye. Robin had grown up into a fine gentleman, but for Virender he was still a little boy, bursting with enthusiasm. This was probably because Robin was still a kid at heart.

A few months before the exam, Virender had bumped into a friend from the air force, who had told him that he was commanding the adventure cell at the air force station in Hindon. He had asked him if he would like to take his boys on a microlight aircraft, which is powered by a motorcycle-type engine and can carry one or two people. It is usually a covered aircraft but this particular model was open, with the seats dangling and the flyers strapped in. One can literally feel the wind in one's hair. The aircraft flies low enough for the pilots to see the ground below, spot schools with children playing and even see birds flying beside the aircraft. Virender was very happy when his friend agreed to fly the two boys the very next day.

'We are going microlight-flying tomorrow,' Virender announced to Robin and Birdie. There was great excitement that day, but unfortunately, Robin was scolded by his father that evening and he was in a terrible mood. Despite being sullen and angry, Robin was the first to step out of the house the next morning. There was no way he was going to miss this opportunity. He dressed up as a fighter pilot in a jacket, the emblem of 7 Squadron (Battle Axes) stitched on to the pocket by a local tailor, a scarf, a cap and his imitation Ray-Bans, just like the air force pilots modelling for Yamaha

bikes. His excitement was palpable as they reached the runway. He was still not ready to talk to Virender, which he made clear by standing at least 10 feet away. The squadron commander arrived in his jeep, met Robin and asked him to get into the seat dangling below the aircraft while Birdie was put in the rear seat. They had an unfettered 360-degree view. The small engine sputtered to life and the propeller started rotating as the machine took off. It was a dream come true for Robin. He was beaming after the long flight from Delhi to Ghaziabad, and when they landed, Virender noticed that his anger had melted away.

Robin had cleared his exams, but he still had to clear his SSB to qualify for the IMA. Before his SSB was due, the written exam for the next course was being held. Risk-averse by nature, Virender advised Robin to take it again, so that he would be eligible for the second round of SSB if he didn't make it in the first attempt. Though Robin was well prepared and confident, he took his father's advice and cleared it with flying colours.

The SSB examination was to be held in Bhopal. Robin and Mac were to travel together. The SSB comprises a series of physical and mental tests designed to assess the aptitude of a candidate. Before leaving, it was agreed that Robin would call his family by 1 p.m. on the last day to tell them the result. However, when no call came till way after the decided time, Virender, who had been sitting nervously beside the telephone, got up and walked out. He was on tenterhooks, and this surely meant that Robin had not made it.

To his surprise, the call finally came at 4 p.m., when a tired but elated Robin announced that he had indeed been selected. When asked why he hadn't called earlier, he said that his friends, including Mac, hadn't made it and were upset. Hence, he had decided to accompany them to the railway station. It was typical of Robin to offer a shoulder to cry on and a sympathetic ear to his friends.

There was now a spring in his step and he was always happy and cheerful. Perhaps he had become the best version of himself. A dream that

he had cherished for longer than he could remember had finally been realized. No one had doubted that he would make it this time, but seeing it actually happen had filled the entire family with immense joy.

Birdie, who had seen Robin toil day and night, was filled with admiration for his elder brother. His dedication to his goal had motivated Birdie as well. Though they were on different paths now and didn't share as much with each other, Birdie never stopped looking up to him. Once, they witnessed a small accident while waiting at a traffic light in Noida. A cycle-rickshaw rider had inadvertently bumped into a car due to the heavy traffic and now the owners, three big, brawny men, were bullying him. One of them held the collar of the poor man, threatening to hit him. A crowd of onlookers had gathered around them but nobody was intervening. The helpless rickshaw rider was shaking with fear. They were demanding money for the light scratch on their bumper. Seeing the plight of the hapless man, Robin immediately got down from his scooter and, without giving it a moment's thought, intervened. All three men now shifted their focus to Robin, who quietly offered to pay for their damages with whatever money he had. He then called them out for harassing an underprivileged person. They were embarrassed and left. Birdie was awestruck. He now realized that he was perhaps wrong to judge Robin for not answering back or asking questions all these years. He was different, driven by matters that most people accepted sitting down or overlooked. In fact, now he aspired to be like him.

Hemant was ecstatic when he heard his best friend's voice on the phone. He knew why Robin had called but waited for him to break the news.

'I made it, Khalse!' Robin screamed with delight.

'I didn't have even an ounce of doubt, Robin,' Hemant said, truly happy for his friend.

'I am really happy, Khalse. Get ready, I am coming to take you out for a treat,' Robin said before disconnecting the call.

Thirty minutes later, they were sitting at Nirula's, enjoying their favourite ice-cream flavour, '21 love'. They were thrilled that the journey they had started together had come to a fruitful end and Robin's dedication and hard work had paid off. Hemant, too, was set to leave to train as a commercial pilot. It remained unsaid, but they were dreading the final goodbyes.

'How will we meet now, Robin?' Hemant asked glumly.

'We may not meet as often but we will meet, Khalse. You can visit me once I get commissioned, and I will do the same when I come on leave. And sometimes we can plan to be in Noida at the same time. So don't worry. We'll do something. For now, we should concentrate on doing well in our chosen fields,' Robin said.

'You think so?' asked Hemant.

'I know so,' answered Robin.

Hemant smiled and hugged his friend. Their paths were diverging but they were confident that this would not change anything. They promised the same to each other and went back home with a little bit of sadness but a whole lot of hope.

Humility was one of Robin's strongest traits, so he couldn't attribute his success to hard work alone. His faith in his Gods was firm, and he believed that his achievement was a result of their blessings too. Hence, Mac and he decided to go to Jammu to offer prayers at Vaishno Devi's shrine. The boys packed their bags and set out on the journey. They took a train to Jammu and decided to begin the 14-kilometre climb in the evening. They had some free time before that, so Mac suggested that they go to his father's friend's house, who was also in the army. Robin agreed.

A short ride later, the boys stood at the army officer's doorstep. One of them rang the doorbell and waited. The door opened after a few minutes, and before them stood a beautiful girl. Their eyes met briefly. She held his gaze for a few seconds before looking away. Mac watched them with a cheeky grin on his face. He knew something was happening.

An older woman, presumably the girl's mother, came to the door right then, breaking the spell. Mac made the introductions before stepping in. Mac's uncle was home as well, so they spent the next couple of hours with the entire family. He also had a younger son.

Trays of snacks and tea were passed around as they made small talk. Mac noticed how Robin's face lit up every time the girl asked him a question and he seemed overenthusiastic to answer it. Robin was very impressed to know that she was pursuing an engineering degree and was focused on her studies and career. Her younger brother, on the other hand, wanted to join the forces, just like the older boys.

Normally, visits to their parents' friends' homes were a formality and not something the boys enjoyed. But this time Robin seemed to have lost track of time and had no intention of leaving. But soon it was time to go. The boys reluctantly said their goodbyes and set off.

They had barely exited the gate when Mac slapped his friend's shoulder and asked, 'What was that?'

'What?' Robin asked, feigning ignorance.

'You think I didn't notice you guys back there?' Mac asked.

'Mac, I really don't know what you mean,' Robin said with a shrug.

'Are you telling me you don't like her?' Mac went on.

'I mean, yes, she is pretty. Really pretty. I really love her eyes!' Robin said with a sigh.

'Her eyes, eh? Since when do you notice eyes and all?' Mac asked with a grin on his face.

'Since today. They were hard to miss. So beautiful. I am going to call her Naina!' Robin replied, smiling dreamily.

It didn't end there. Robin spoke about her during the ascent and even while climbing down. He said she was different from the other girls her age. There was no denying the fact that he was smitten. By the time they came down, Robin was so consumed by her thoughts that he insisted that they go back to her house.

'We must go one more time, Mac. I really need to see her again. I will be off to the academy soon; then who knows when we will meet?' pleaded

Robin.

‘I understand your feelings, Robin, but what will we say? Why have we come again? Don’t you think it will be a little awkward?’ Mac reasoned.

Robin knew Mac was right. He had met her just once. How would he explain why he needed to see her again? He knew it didn’t add up, but he also knew that he wouldn’t be at peace till he saw her again. Suddenly, as if on cue, a thought struck him and he looked at Mac excitedly. ‘Let’s say we came back to give them prasad!’ cried Robin.

Offering prasad to people after returning from a pilgrimage is often regarded as a mark of love and respect, hence Mac agreed without a fuss. Besides, he had never seen Robin like this and really wanted to support him. So, just a few hours before their train back home, they rushed to Naina’s house. This time, Mac was convinced that Robin’s feelings were not one-sided. They held each other’s gaze for longer. She blushed crimson, a shy smile playing on her lips. Though both Robin and she were shy and didn’t speak much, they were equally love-struck. No words were exchanged but their expressions said it all.

After saying their goodbyes yet again, the boys rushed to the railway station to catch the train back to Delhi. Robin seemed lost in thought as they settled into their seats. Mac noticed his solemn expression and asked what was on his mind.

‘She is the girl for me, Mac, no one else,’ he said, looking into the distance, as if he could envision their future together. They had known each other for just two days and met only twice. Neither had they spoken to each other, nor had they exchanged any information to be able to do so in the future. But Robin was hopelessly in love for the first time in his life! He wasn’t sure how he was going to see it through, but in his heart he knew they would meet again, and one day he would tell her exactly how he felt. For now, this was enough.

Soon it was time to leave for the IMA. Preparations began in full swing. Days would be spent buying, packing, taking tips from his father and looking forward to the first day of the rest of his life. Robin was ready, not only lock, stock and barrel but also in spirit.

Thus, with stars in his eyes and hope in his heart, Robin flew out of his nest. Just like Virender had done at the age of fifteen, he went to the academy all by himself.



CHAPTER 13

Gates to Happiness

Robin's excitement knew no bounds. He was finally on a train to Dehradun. He looked out of the window and reminisced about the past: his days of struggle; the strict regime he had followed; the day his NDA results were declared and how broken he'd felt. But he had not let that bring him down. He had convinced himself that he could break the barriers and had resolved to use his failure to fuel the burning passion he had for the forces. It hadn't been easy. He had sometimes been tempted to join his peers as they partied and had fun, but his determination had always won. In the past few years, he had not only trained his body, but his mental strength had been put to the test as well. Now he was ready for a life in the academy.

The beautiful town of Dehradun is situated in the lush green Dun Valley, nestled in the lap of the Shivaliks. A dreamy town steeped in British military culture, it boasts leading public schools and prestigious institutions like the Wildlife Institute of India and the IMA. The IMA is the fountainhead of military virtues—honour, integrity, discipline, a strong sense of morality, smartness and, above all, putting the country before everything else. The majestic structure, the sounds of bugles and drums, the crisp calls of drill instructors, the fragrance of the cool forest air and the ambiance in general fills every visitor with awe. Its imposing blood-red and steel-grey Chetwode building is flanked by tall trees. Green mountains in the background complete the picture. It is the sanctum sanctorum of all officers who have donned the olive-green uniform. The academy evokes a feeling of belonging in the young officers and the veterans, and binds them together. While inaugurating the academy in 1932, Field Marshal Phillip

Chetwode had famously said: ‘The safety, honour and welfare of your country come first always and every time. The honour, welfare and comfort of the men you command come next. Your own ease, comfort and safety come last always and every time.’ This has since become the credo of the prestigious institute.

Robin was finally where he always wanted to be—standing in front of the grand Chetwode building in his blue jeans and black T-shirt, along with several other gentleman cadets, or GCs, for the academy fall in. His name had been quite high in the merit list, so he was there on day one.

New entrants into the academy get to hear all sorts of stories about the strenuous physical training and the toughening-up sessions conducted by the seniors. The tales are often fear-inducing (mostly due to the way they are narrated). But Robin was unfazed. He had dreamt of this place since he was a child and was ready for every aspect of it.

Fortunately, he had an army background and knew exactly what to expect, unlike the others who seemed quite nervous. However, he was aware that it was not going to be easy, but he was prepared for all that was to come.

His reverie was broken by another Delhi boy, GC Sumeet Dua, who had been noticing him for a while. Sumeet’s demeanour seemed a bit different from Robin’s. He stood nervously and seemed intimidated by his surroundings. A short introductory conversation revealed that both of them were from the same city, and this put Sumeet at ease. Unlike Robin, he came from a civilian background.

There were a few familiar faces in the crowd as well. As a lot of the children of defence personnel opt for the forces, running into an acquaintance isn’t a rarity. Robin bumped into GC Vishwas Bahukandhi. Their fathers had served in the same regiment, but they hadn’t really spent a lot of time together growing up. Nonetheless, it was comforting to see a familiar face in the crowd, and Robin and Vishwas hugged each other fondly.

Robin was assigned to Naushera Company in Cariappa Battalion. The GCs are allotted to companies named after famous battles the army has

fought. The first two days are spent completing formalities and acquiring the equipment issued to the new GCs, to be returned at the end of the tenure. Robin carefully selected everything he would need. Keeping in mind his father's advice, he would always be on time so that he could get the best of the lot and not be stuck with faulty equipment. He was thorough and meticulous.

The IMA is known for its spit and polish, perfectly painted buildings, immaculately trimmed hedges, beautifully landscaped gardens and lawns, and well-furnished living quarters for the GCs. There is also a low-lying area next to Tons River a little distance away, called 'Khadda' (pit). The GCs are put in renovated barracks there. Robin was assigned accommodation in the barracks, along with the rest of his company.

Within two days, Robin had completed all the formalities and arranged his things in the cabin allotted to him. Even though the tight schedule did not permit anything beyond the assigned tasks, Robin would be generous in offering help and tips to the other cadets. One of the most significant teachings of academy life is teamwork, but Robin didn't need too many lessons in that. Every time his friends, like Sumeet, needed help, they knew exactly whom to consult.

Every morning Robin would wake up, even though it would be as early as 3.30 a.m., and count his blessings to be able to experience it all. To say the training period is rigorous is an understatement. The curriculum is designed to first break, physically and mentally, and then remake each cadet into a trained and proficient officer of the Indian Army.

The company sergeant major, or the CSM, who is a third-termer, assesses the new GCs with a keen eye in the first few days to appoint an 'understudy', who is then supposed to help him out with all his responsibilities. Hence, it needs to be someone competent and trustworthy. It is a matter of pride to be selected for the job. Robin was picked by his CSM. He was thrilled, even though it meant he had to report everywhere before the others. He aimed to excel and took everything that came with this job very seriously. There was a special perk too. The CSM had a telephone, and Virender and Tripta could call on it sometimes.

Though most GCs join on day one, there are a few who get in later. Sometimes selected candidates withdraw their applications and the ones lower in order are considered. Hence GCs kept trickling in even a few weeks later. One of them was GC Himanshu Kalia.

Totally lost in the new place, he was looking for help, when someone welcomed him by making him do two quick forward rolls before guiding him to the CSM's cabin. With his box in one hand, suitcase in the other and a rucksack on his back, he reached the CSM's room soaked in sweat as it was July and the sun was scorching. He hesitantly knocked on the door and waited for someone to respond. Right then, a smart and confident GC came out of the next room and greeted him with a broad smile. Ever since he had joined the academy, this was the first person who had smiled at Himanshu.

'Good afternoon, Sir, I'm Cadet Himanshu Kalia,' he mumbled nervously.

'Newcomer?' Robin asked.

'Yes, Sir, reported yesterday,' Himanshu replied.

'Oye, don't call me sir, I'm your course mate, Thapar.'

He took Himanshu to his room and gave him a glass of water. After that they went to the cadets' mess for lunch, where he introduced Himanshu to the CSM and the other appointments of the company. Coincidentally, Himanshu was allotted the room next to Robin's. Being his neighbour, Robin helped Himanshu settle down. They developed an instant bond and remained neighbours and friends till they graduated, even though their platoons, smaller groups the GCs are divided into, changed in the later terms. They always made sure that their rooms were next to each other so that they could meet each other regularly.

Robin had dived headlong into the demanding routine of the academy. The first few weeks of the first term are usually the toughest, since the days are packed and hence exhausting. Whatever time is left is taken up by seniors, who make the cadets do different exercises. In academy lingo, this is called 'ragda'. Though performed grudgingly, the importance of these sessions is realized later when the GCs graduate to senior terms. It is important to break the attitude and egos of the young boys. It helps them

learn how to deal with different situations in their careers. However, it is disliked by the cadets undergoing it.

Robin remained calm in all kinds of situations. He would look forward to the training and be extremely passionate about it. He didn't treat the academy curriculum as a task that had to be completed. With his happy-go-lucky attitude, he would make even the ragda sessions sound like fun. He would take on every physical and mental task as a challenge, prepare a logical and foolproof strategy and successfully complete it. His training in the NCC stood him in good stead. He had taken that stint very seriously and that gave him the confidence to meet the challenges of academy life. In fact, he had won an award for 'Best NCC Cadet' of his batch, which had been presented by the then chief minister of Delhi.

His spirit often motivated others around him. He took immense pride in his turnout, and so his kits and rigs would always be spick and span and ready. He also always had a spare set of web equipment, cleaned and polished, which he gladly lent to his peers. He even kept his cabin shipshape, setting an example for others.

Writing letters to his parents had become a regular feature of his routine. He would apprise them of all that was happening at the academy and also ask for guidance from his father. While Tripta would always sympathize with his predicament, Virender would motivate him to take it all in his stride. He would brush aside his mother's concerns by telling her that it was needed for them to become officers one day. Virender's tips were followed by Robin to a T. Often, he would take pages of his letters, with pointers he wanted to follow, and stick them on his wall, door or cupboard.

Himanshu and Robin slowly started working together like a well-oiled machine. One would go to collect the equipment required for the next activity, while the other would quickly sprint to the mess to collect their breakfast. Though Himanshu did not come from an army background, they shared a similar sense of passion and enthusiasm for their training. An ace swimmer who would go on to win a gold medal in water polo, Robin would help Himanshu better his skills so that he would pass his swimming tests. Seeing their camaraderie, their peers started addressing them as 'bajrangi

and pachrangi'. They would also go out together on their off days (mostly Sundays), or 'liberty' as it was called. Both friends would sit and plan for the day carefully to make the most of it. Sometimes it would involve meeting Robin's relatives in Dehradun. Other times, they would take leisurely walks or go shopping to Paltan Bazaar, where they would buy audio cassettes or gorge on the local fare of Dehradun bakeries.

Once, while returning to the IMA from Dehradun on their bicycles after an enjoyable Sunday outing, they witnessed an accident. A two-wheeler had collided with an autorickshaw and the rider was lying unconscious on the road. It was evening and they were getting late, but they immediately stopped to help the injured person. Seeing his condition, Robin insisted that they take him to the hospital. He picked up his damaged scooter, parked it in a nearby shop along with their bicycles and quickly hired a cab to go to the closest hospital. Robin remained at the hospital till he was sure that the person was in safe hands of experienced doctors. As a result, they returned late to the academy and narrowly escaped punishment. However, Robin did not regret his decision.

Robin always tried to do everything better than the rest. Often, he would be the one asking extra questions, eliciting silent groans from the rest of the class. He was aware of the sentiment, but his focus was rock solid. He was assertive and did not hesitate to take a stand, a quality mostly found in leaders.

Once, Naushera Company was training under Capt Wankhade, their company commander, for a team obstacle-course competition. It was a difficult 'W' obstacle to negotiate. Capt Wankhade explained the best way to go about it and then turned to the GCs and said, 'Have you all understood or do you need a demonstration?'

Everybody kept quiet except Robin, who said, 'Yes, we would like to see a demonstration.' Capt Wankhade was taken aback! GCs rarely answered back and he was not prepared for it. However, he gave them a demonstration. Later, he looked at Robin and said, 'That's how it's done.'

Naushera Company did not win the competition but they completed the course on time.

As time passed, it became clear that his apparent outspoken nature, which initially was mistaken for arrogance, was anything but that. He was genuine and not afraid to speak his mind. He had all the qualities of an ideal GC—fitness, enthusiasm and vigour. He did not hesitate to take a stand. His optimism and cheerfulness were infectious, and these, along with his never-give-up attitude, made him endearing. No matter what his friends asked him, Robin never said, ‘I don’t know.’ Mostly he did know. And even if he didn’t, he tried to figure it out. Himanshu really admired this quality in him.

Robin was quite competitive and would often repeat ‘shera shera’ (what the GCs who belonged to Naushera were called) to himself and among his company to instil a sense of belonging. Old habits die hard, so ‘shera shera’ also found its way into many of the doodles that adorned his cabin walls, just like the drawings of aeroplanes he had made growing up.

The strong sense of righteousness he had grown up with stuck with him at the IMA too. Often, in the rush of things, GCs pick up any equipment available, for example, a bicycle or rain cape, rather than looking for their own. Robin, on the other hand, would rather get wet than pick up somebody else’s rain cape. Initially, some thought he was too idealistic. But it was a reflection of the strong set of values he had been brought up with, and, with time, this quality was appreciated as well.

Robin truly came into his own at the academy. He was popular not just among his course mates, but also his instructors. He worked passionately towards all the jobs assigned to them and thoroughly enjoyed doing them. Academics included. He had been an average student in school but finished the first term with a silver medal for being the best direct-entry cadet. That was the validation he needed. Nothing could stop him now.

After the term, most GCs had plans of going home but not Robin. He opted for the parajumping course in Agra instead. He wrote to his parents, asking them to make arrangements and meet him in Agra. He was the only first-termer to have opted for it. The others were all his seniors.

They did their ground training first, learning how to land, how to take positions, how to deal with the feeling of losing height at a high speed, etc. Robin couldn't wait for his first jump. The day finally arrived. As an AN-32, a military transport aircraft, revved up, his colleagues sat nervously, watching it gain the right height. There was complete silence. As the jump lights came on, the jumpmaster started shouting orders. The GCs stood up and conducted last-minute checks. The first jumper was given a pat on his back as the green light came on, and then the second. Robin was third and with a loud '*Bajrang Bali ki Jai!*' he jumped out. Three seconds later, there was a tug, followed by a jerk as his parachute deployed. He was ecstatic as he slowly descended on the field below. His fear had melted away. He felt more confident. With great pride, he wore the small emblem of the parachute on his left sleeve.

He finished his last jump with elan. His mother had come to Agra to meet him before his return to the IMA. Virender had asked one of his friends to pick her up and take her to the mess where Robin was staying. Robin showed her around the hangars where they trained. After that they went to Taj Mahal, where they posed for a customary photo and ate the famous kulfi of Agra. The first term ended on a high note for Robin.

The second term comes with its own set of changes for the direct-entry GCs, as it did for Robin. They are joined by their peers from the NDA. It brings a sense of nervous excitement. The belief is that ex-NDAs, having trained for three years, join with an advantage of being physically fitter and more accustomed to a life in the academy than the six-month-old GCs. Hence, they are expected to be arrogant and pompous.

However, when they interacted with them, Robin realized that this was a myth. Some of them came to him and his friends to ask for guidance. Regardless, Robin was confident of his physical strength and skills, so he never felt intimidated by the arrival of his new course mates.

He had another reason to look forward to the new term: His friend Mac, who had not made it in the same SSB as Robin, had cleared it this time. Robin welcomed him and was happy to have an old friend around. Mac was now GC Rajesh Makkar. However, he wasn't the only familiar face. Among

the ex-NDAs who had joined the course was his childhood friend from Meerut, Donny. He had cracked the NDA after school and now everyone addressed him as GC Samudra Vijay Sharma. They had lost touch after Meerut and had met briefly in Pathankot. Irrespective, being back in the same place and training together made it all beautifully nostalgic.

The new course mates from the NDA settled down in due course, despite the hectic pace of the academy. Robin was careful not to slow down. On the other hand, he was a senior now. His course mates and he were supposed to make sure that the first-termers were toughened up, the way their seniors had done for them. Robin, however, found little pleasure in making anyone undergo any more 'ragda' than what he thought was necessary, sticking to basic physical exercises. This made his juniors respect him.

In May that year, the momentous news broke out that India had conducted nuclear tests in Pokhran. However, a week later, Pakistan, too, conducted tests. Suddenly, the atmosphere changed. The administration at the academy decided to have a debate on the topic. Based on his performance in the last debate, Robin was selected. After writing out his argument, he sent it to his father for his opinion. Virender helped him revise the script satisfactorily. But Robin found out that one of his friends was keen to participate, so after some consideration, he decided to withdraw. He even gave his friend the argument he had written.

Many days later, when Virender inquired about the debate, Robin said, 'Oh Papa, you had written a great speech. My friend won.' Virender was annoyed but Robin good-naturedly said, 'But Papa, he was very keen to participate.' He had great qualities like consideration, concern and kindness for others. But he was also humble. He felt embarrassed talking about his achievements. With a shy smile, he would brush aside any compliment given to him.

As Robin had hardly spent any time with his family since joining the academy, they would make up for it by visiting him. One time, Virender, Tripta and Birdie came to see him, and they sat together in the canteen, while the small TV in the corner played out the news of the nuclear tests. Just then, one of his seniors walked in and Robin stood up to salute him. After politely greeting Robin's parents, the senior quietly went about his own work. Birdie was quite amused to witness the strictness of the hierarchy in the academy and couldn't help feel happy that his brother had made his way to the place he was destined to be at.

Sometimes, Tripta would make the trip alone with goodies in tow. During one of her solo visits, Robin was busy and asked his friend GC Saurabh Kalia to keep her company till he returned. He happily sat and chatted with her until Robin was free. Around a year later, after the news of Kalia's abduction and eventual martyrdom broke out, she couldn't stop thinking of the simple, smiling face of the boy for days.

The boys would be more at ease when Tripta visited alone. Since Virender was still serving, the boys, who looked up to him as a senior officer, would be formal and maintain decorum around him. They would drop their inhibitions around Tripta. As the owner of the canteen was a distant relative of the Thapars, she would offer to treat the boys on the house! Thus many complimentary plates of noodles, baked sweets and tumblers of cold coffee would be polished off in no time.

During his early days in the academy, Robin would write to his father about how much he enjoyed the lifestyle and the daily activities. Robin's only struggle was in developing a 'killer instinct', which, according to him, was necessary. In the letters, he described how, during games, his teammates would push him to charge the opponent but he wouldn't for fear of hurting his rival. After all, he was a gentle soul and one couldn't change his grain.

Virender would explain to him how being in uniform was different from being just a killer, otherwise even a butcher could have become a soldier, and that the academy would teach him this soon. Sure enough, when they began different exercises and camps, Robin understood what his father had

meant and was happy to update him on the changes in him. Once again, Robin felt blessed to have his father behind him every time he felt the need to look over his shoulder.

But there were occasional struggles as well. One of the earliest and most significant ones was during his BPET (battle physical efficiency tests) at the start of the second term. Running was his forte and he was confident of excelling. Just before starting the dash, Robin had a bar of chocolate for an extra boost of energy and took off. However, he developed a sharp pain during the run, blacked out and had to be taken to the military hospital. The doctors found that Robin had overexerted himself and was severely exhausted. Even though his company hadn't performed too badly in the BPET, Robin felt disappointed with himself. 'I will consider it the biggest defeat of my life,' he wrote to his parents. When Virender came to visit him the next time, Robin looked dejected. He aspired to be the best at any cost.

Robin was eager to participate in the swimming competition (200 and 400 metres) that year. It was his only opportunity, as he would have graduated by the time the next competition was held. But to his surprise, he was selected for the battalion water polo team instead. The final was a hard-fought match with much ducking and hustling and tense moments, with the rest of the battalion screaming, shouting and cheering. But finally, their team stuck to the two-goal lead. With the final whistle and an explosive cheer from their supporters, Robin's team won the competition. It was a proud moment when the commandant slipped a ribbon in IMA colours with the gold medal around Robin's neck.

Soon, the third and final term of the course arrived. Once again, Robin chose to go for hang-gliding in his term break rather than taking time off with his family. He wrote to them from there, informing them of the things they were doing in Pithoragarh. There would be times, even if just for a moment, when he would wonder whether he had made the right choice, but the very next minute, he would say, 'Once I have made a decision, I will have no regrets.'

Time seemed to fly by with little respite. During the final term, in 1998, they had to navigate an obstacle course. Robin cleared the tough obstacles

comfortably, making his instructor happy. When the GC who attempted the obstacle course right after Robin did not do so well, the instructor asked Robin to demonstrate it for him. So Robin went through the obstacles again. A little later, he was asked to demonstrate the technique again, this time in slow motion. Unfortunately, he slipped and fell on his shoulder. He lay in great agony, groaning in pain. His friends gathered around and discovered that Robin had dislocated his shoulder. One of them put pressure on his shoulder and managed to slip it back in place. He was taken to the medical inspection room where the doctor examined it, bandaged it and advised rest.

Robin recovered quickly and was back to his normal routine just in time to participate in a boxing competition. It was a key event and there was a lot of excitement around it. Unfortunately, his opponent struck Robin with a hard blow on his shoulder, the one he had dislocated at the obstacle course. He fell, writhing in pain, as his shoulder was dislocated once again. This time, he was admitted to the military hospital. While there was anxiety about his health, there were rumours that Robin might be relegated or withdrawn from the academy on medical grounds as he was missing out on crucial training. The uncertainty disturbed Virender, and he shared his worries with his friends, who assured him that no such thing would happen. It put Robin at ease when his father passed on the reassurances to him.

Around then, an important tactical exercise that involved a tough march in the mountains had to take place, as a competitive test of endurance. Robin's arm had not recovered. This put him in a great dilemma. He was not in a condition for this tough test, but he was not prepared to let his company down as everyone was required to participate. He gave a call to his father. Virender saw it as an opportunity to make his son independent and advised Robin to decide for himself. Robin felt that he should make an honest attempt and if he still could not make it, so be it. Thus, encouraged by his decision and his course mates' enthusiasm, he decided to go for it. With their assistance, his great determination and never-say-die spirit, Robin made it through the competition and the company did well.

Robin's course was nearing completion in the academy. The cadets were to be taken to Jammu for an 'on-the-job training' along the line of control

(LoC). The trip was special. Robin was going to visit Naushera, where Virender and GC Vishwas's father's former battalion was deployed. There was another reason for his excitement. They were to pass through Jammu.

All this while, he hadn't had a chance or means to be able to be in touch with Naina, but that did not mean that he had forgotten her. During their weekly outing, his friends would admire the beautiful women of Dehradun from a distance, but every girl Robin looked at reminded him of Naina. Thus, when he heard that they would pass through Jammu, the thought of meeting her again thrilled him. He knew where she lived and nothing else. But that didn't deter him, and he decided to pay her a visit. Robin mentioned it to Himanshu, who asked him how he would go, as they were accounted for at all times, but Robin said he would find a way.

Luck favoured them, Robin met her and was happy to know that he had a place in her heart. When Robin returned, Himanshu saw his wide grin and hugged his friend. No words were required to understand how their meeting had gone. He now understood why his friend seemed uninterested in any conversation about girls. His heart already belonged to someone.

Robin returned to the academy with newfound vigour. The only things remaining now were the arm that the GCs wanted to opt for and the passing-out parade. Robin, after some discussion with his father, opted for the Armoured Corps. Even though his father was from the Infantry, the Armoured Corps would keep him technically abreast of the study of engines, guns, metallurgy and missiles. Besides, not to forget, Robin was named after a tank—the Vijayanta.

But, instead, he joined the legendary 2 Rajputana Rifles, as he was assigned to the Army Supply Corps. Because of his injury, he had slipped from second position and only the top ten cadets were granted the arm of their choice. But Robin was thrilled nonetheless.

Around this time, the JCO drill instructors, who are generally aloof and strict, began getting a little friendly with the GCs. One day, outside the IMA's tailor shop, where Robin had gone to pick up his suit, he bumped into a drill instructor from Raj Rif, who was stiff as a board, towering and

very imposing. With a meaningful smile, he asked, 'So, GC Thapar, which regiment have you opted for?'

Robin gulped and said, 'Sahib, Raj Rif, I hope I get it.'

Wanting to take a dig at Robin, he mirthfully shot back, 'GC, Indian Army cannot make a mistake like that!'

There was a moment's silence. 'Well, Sahib,' Robin said, 'the Indian Army has made the mistake. I am posted to 2 Raj Rif.'

The JCO looked nonplussed but quickly regained his wit and saluted his now regimental officer with affectionate pride. 'Welcome to the regiment, Sir,' he said and shook Robin's hand.

A few days before the passing-out parade, a dance is organized to celebrate the commissioning. Everybody has to bring along a date to gain entry. This worried Robin. He didn't know any girl who would stay out till so late. He was sitting glumly when his favourite instructor in the academy, Capt Mukherjee, asked him what was wrong. Robin disclosed his problem. 'Oh, that is it?' he asked. 'Well, if you like, you can take my wife to the dance.' Robin was taken aback at first. But then he nodded with a smile on his face. Robin had a great time that night, as the captain's wife was extremely sporting. When he thanked her later, she brushed it aside, saying, 'Come on, Vijyant, I had such a good time.' Robin thanked her irrespective.

Capt Mukherjee remembers Robin as an ever-smiling, affable and enthusiastic GC, who always showed great promise. Of all the memories of him, he recalls one in particular. He once invited his platoon cadets for a farewell dinner. Robin loved the baked vegetables prepared by his wife. Days later, he received a letter from him praising the vegetables and assuring Mukherjee, 'Sir, I will come back one day to have them again, and I will come with a chest full of medals.' That meal remains uncooked.

The academy evokes a feeling of belonging in young officers and veterans alike—a feeling that binds them together as one family that is proud of its

home. It was this feeling that filled Virender's heart as he witnessed the passing-out parade of his son on 12 December 1998. Columns of smart, dashing, immaculately dressed gentlemen cadets marched past with astonishing precision to the tune of 'Sare Jahan Se Acha Hindustan Hamara'. Their heads were held high, and their swords, rifles, buckles and boots gleamed and glinted in the sunlight. Virender's thoughts drifted back to the bitter winter of 1962, when they had graduated to the tunes of 'Colonel Boggy'. The batch then had the feeling of helplessness, to be left out of the Sino-Indian war by a few days. But today everyone was happy and cheerful.

It was a year and a half ago that the family had bid goodbye to a starry-eyed Robin in Noida, as happy as a clam to be living his dream. And now they were here to celebrate his success. Today, he would become an officer.

In the IMA, bearing and smartness are taken to a different level on the parade ground, which is called the Drill Square. Hell befalls any GC who even moves his eyeball. One has to unobtrusively wriggle one's toes in the boots without the slightest movement to ensure circulation of blood in the feet. Sometimes GCs faint on hot sunny days during such practices. Other training sessions are also demanding. In horse riding and firing, Robin had the advantage of having ridden army horses at Meerut and of having fired small arms in his father's unit and the NCC. But there were days when he got a stubborn horse and waited for the period to get over. It was a pleasure to see the GCs go over the jumps in perfect harmony with their horses. But sometimes, riders would get thrown off their horses or hang from the animals' necks till they were made to stop.

Robin also enjoyed field craft and weapon training, even though crawling resulted in chafed elbows. He liked firing the most where the motto was: '*Ek Dushman, Ek Goli* [one enemy one bullet].' There is no end to the perfection and the precision demanded at the academy. In fact, the IMA passing-out parade has the highest standard in the world.

Virender broke out of his reverie and came back to the present moment. He looked around at the parade ground that was decked up for celebration.

The stands were full of colourfully dressed relatives who were there to witness the grand spectacle.

As the cadets marched below the imposing portal, they could see the credo of the academy carved in stone on the walls of the Chetwode building. This has become the guiding mantra of every officer who has passed out from this hallowed academy.

A few hours later, they all took the oath, bringing the ceremony to a close. They were all prepared to move to their units, in far-flung areas of India. Their training was to be put to the test shortly.

GC Vijyant Thapar had trained hard to become Lt Vijyant Thapar. Accompanied by his family, he returned to Noida for a well-deserved break after a long time.



CHAPTER 14

The Dream Destination

This homecoming was special for Robin. He was returning after a year and a half, the longest he had been away from family. This time, however, his life had a different flavour.

Virender felt happy and content with his son's achievement. Friends and family couldn't help noticing how happy the father-son duo looked. Robin was stepping into a new phase of life—a life he had been looking forward to and preparing hard for since the day he realized his ambitions. He had always held immense love and respect for the army, and now he had the same sentiment for the country and his uniform. From his conversations, one could easily make out how spirited and enthusiastic he had become towards the service of his motherland. His dressing and demeanour had always been of a military man, even before he joined the academy. Robin was now the perfect army officer.

All Robin wanted to do during the break before joining the regiment was relax and enjoy his mother's cooking. How he had missed the dishes she whipped up in her kitchen. His birthday was just around the corner and he looked forward to celebrating it with his family.

It was good to be back, but he missed Hemant, who was away for pilot-training. Life in the academy had been so all-consuming and strict that it often seemed like he had spent a lifetime there. Thinking of Hemant, who had always known everything about him, he realized he hadn't even told his best friend about Naina. He decided to call him.

'Hello,' Hemant answered.

'Oye, Khalse, how are you? Robin here!' Robin said excitedly.

‘Robin! How have you been, buddy? Donned the uniform finally?’ Hemant asked.

‘Of course I have. I have another news for you as well. I met a girl in Jammu—Naina,’ exclaimed Robin without wasting time on small talk.

‘Big deal! You wouldn’t have spoken to her anyway. I know you,’ Hemant said with a chuckle.

‘I am not going to repeat what you did with Divya. I spoke to her. Though I am sure you still haven’t spoken to Divya,’ Robin teased.

‘Yaar, I had to leave anyway, so what was the point? So, no, I didn’t,’ Hemant said, a twinge of disappointment in his voice.

‘Naina is very sweet, yaar. Very beautiful. I want to marry her. After I have served for a little while, I will speak to her parents. I have decided,’ Robin confided in his friend.

‘Does she want to marry you too?’ Hemant asked.

‘I think so,’ came the reply.

Hemant knew his friend well. Robin was as sincere in relationships as he was in his work. He wasn’t one to harbour frivolous feelings for a girl. Robin’s idea was to court her after marriage, and Hemant was not surprised. He only wanted to make sure that he was on the right track and would not have his heart broken.

‘But both of you are not in the same place. How will you keep in touch?’ Hemant asked.

‘Oho, Khalse, we will write to each other. What else?’ Robin said.

‘Oh, good idea! Maybe I should also write to Divya,’ Hemant said hopefully.

‘Yes! You must. Now take care of yourself and keep in touch. Okay?’ With that Robin disconnected the line.

They may not have spoken in over a year, but they could still pick up where they had left off, thought Robin, smiling. He was an officer now and Hemant, too, would be a trained pilot soon, but when speaking to each other, they were back to being teenagers, teasing and advising each other on matters of the heart! Robin wished they could have met instead of just

talking on the phone but brushed the disappointment aside, telling himself that they would meet the next time he was on leave.

Now that he had spoken to Naina, Robin wanted to share it with the world. But he was too shy to tell his parents. Maybe he could tell his friends and cousins. Thus, when Bonny came for a short visit to Delhi, he didn't waste much time in telling her.

Bonny was in Delhi for work and also to meet a prospective match for marriage. She requested Robin to come along. She wanted to spend more time with him and also get his opinion on the man she might marry. So both Robin and Bonny set out to meet him at a coffee shop. As they sat across from him at the table, their faces lit up with mischievous smiles. The man was bald. Robin and Bonny had remained in touch through letters over the years and hadn't lost the special connection they shared. The similarity of their reactions didn't surprise them. Bonny glanced at her brother, shaking her head slowly.

Once home, Robin took her to his room, made her sit and said, 'I have to tell you something very important.'

'What, Robin?' Bonny asked, clearly intrigued.

'You remember I had gone to Vaishno Devi after my result came out last year? I met a girl there,' Robin started.

'Yes, of course I do. What about this girl?' probed Bonny, her interest piquing.

'I like her. She likes me too,' he said shyly.

'Wow, Robin, you have beaten me at finding a partner,' teased Bonny. She knew her cousin was a simple soul. If he liked a girl enough to tell her, he was serious about her. She smiled at him fondly.

Bonny could also sense that the bond between Virender and Robin had deepened. On her way back, listening to them discuss military matters at ease in the car filled her heart with joy and pride.

Time flew by rather quickly. Keeping up the old tradition of getting family pictures clicked, the Thapars decided to get one at a studio in Noida. Both Virender and Robin donned their smart uniforms, Tripta wore a beautiful saree and Birdie a smart suit. From pictures of a tiny Birdie

slipping out of a young Robin's lap to one with everyone in their formal attire, the family had come a long way.

Robin was particularly excited about his birthday that year. This was the first time in his life he had everything he had wished for. While he had been undemanding on all of his birthdays till date, this time he told his parents he wanted to celebrate. They agreed and decided to take his friends out for pizza. Thus, his twenty-second birthday was well spent with friends and family, all of whom appreciated Robin's happy journey. He was radiant and his contentment was visible. Virender and Tripta were glad that he was spending the last few days at home amid such joy and laughter.

Finally, his leave was over and it was time for him to join his regiment in Morar Cantonment in Gwalior. Robin was to take the 7 a.m. train on 31 December 1998. That morning, a thick fog enveloped the city, which is not uncommon in December, and visibility was reduced to just a few metres. Their car was moving at a snail's pace. It became worse after they crossed the Yamuna. One had to stick one's neck out of the window to see the road. Crossing their fingers, they kept going and managed to reach the railway station just in time to exchange hurried goodbyes. The train moved slowly at first and then gained speed, leaving behind the familiar faces. Fields and small villages came into view as it entered the open countryside. After Agra, it slowed down a bit as it moved over the mighty Chambal, across which lay a labyrinth of ravines. Till a few years ago, gangs of brigands had operated in the badlands of Bhind and Morena, and had given it a fearsome reputation. He remembered his uncle, who had made a name for himself as the superintendent of police of Bhind. The dreaded kingpin of the dacoits, Malkhan Singh, who was over six feet tall, with a big bushy moustache, carrying a Mauser on his back and a big reward on his head, had surrendered to him first. Another gang of dacoits, led by Vijay Singh, had also been eliminated in an encounter by him. Robin had heard a lot about his heroics but, unfortunately, his uncle had died too early. The regular, rhythmic clatter of the train's wheels made him drowsy, and by the time he

shook himself alert, they were on the outskirts of Gwalior, which was once the seat of the Scindia Dynasty.

Two of his course mates, Lt Neikezhakuo Kenguruse and Lt Praveen Tomar, from the IMA were also joining the same unit. Tomar was ex-NDA while both Robin and Kenguruse were direct entries from the IMA. Tomar was the first to reach the unit, a day before, accounting for unforeseen delays. Robin reached right on time, and Kenguruse reached a day and a half late due to an unexpected diversion of his flight from Nagaland. Though the three newly commissioned officers were supposed to arrive on the same day, they all ended up reporting on a different one.

As the train Robin was on slowly chugged into the platform, the reception party from the unit that had come to receive him got ready. They had been waiting for 'Lieutenant Sahib' with a cup of tea and a warm welcome. The soldiers, all tall and well built, placed his luggage of one trunk, a suitcase and a bedroll into the small truck. Robin had never had a reception like this before and felt quite important. He also felt proud at the thought that he would be commanding men like these. But the real reception awaited him at the battalion. The arrival of a new officer, called the 'baby of the battalion', is an important event in the unit, and it has to be made memorable for the newcomer. As part of the fake proceedings, he was made to wait outside the fake adjutant's (an important appointment in the battalion) office while the latter gave a loud dressing down to a fake offender. The aim was to psych up the new officer on his first day. Finally, he was marched in and given a long, hard look. He was kept standing and, then, with a curt remark that his shoes were not polished enough, was handed over to the senior subaltern (an officer senior in rank). The subaltern gave him a long sermon on dos and don'ts. Then he was asked to give money for canteen stores, etc., to his *sahayak* (buddy). Robin did as he was told without giving it much thought. Once a decent amount had been collected, he was allowed to go to his room and sweets were procured from that money! He had hardly sat down when he was called out again. Poor Robin was not aware that he had been tricked and his identity card had been nicked. In the forces, losing one's identity card has grave consequences.

Hence, the plan was to scare him into thinking that he had made a big mistake.

As per protocol, offenders are kept at the quarter guard, and Robin was made to as well. To make it more believable, Tomar was also pulled up because his course mate had lost his identity card on the first day and he needed to teach him a thing or two. Though confused by the strange events, Robin stayed calm and played along.

They gave up the act only after Tomar landed up at the quarter guard on being summoned. The identity card was handed over, and Robin was asked to sign the register for visitors. But the fun was far from over. He was asked to dance to entertain everyone to the music of bagpipes. The soldiers, who were in civilian clothes, cheered and clapped. He even rode a bike with garbage bins strapped to it. Capt Mohit Saxena, one of the seniors, looked at all of this in amusement. Pictures were also taken to document the fun.

Finally, the day ended. Lt Kenguruse had still not reached, so the customary 'dining-in', a dinner organized to welcome the new officers and to break the ice was postponed. The matter was made worse by lack of information about his whereabouts. Thankfully, the officers decided to wait before reporting the issue. Everyone was relieved when he arrived a day and a half later.

Now that all the officers were in, it was time for the 'dining-in'. Receiving a formal invitation for an event organized specially for them was a matter of much pride and pleasure for the newly commissioned officers. They each received a card from the commanding officer of the unit. Robin's card read, 'Lt Col Ravindranath and all officers request the pleasure of Lt Vijyant Thapar for dinner at 7.30 p.m. at the officers' mess.' He preserved it as a souvenir.

With that he became part of Prince of Wales's Own, 2nd Battalion, the Rajputana Rifles, also called the Ever-Victorious Battalion, whose motto is '*Veer Bhogye Vasundhara* [the brave alone will inherit the earth]', whose battle cry is '*Raja Ram Chander ki Jai* [hail Lord Rama]' and whose presiding deity is Karni Mata. It is the oldest rifle regiment with the distinction of having been awarded the first Victoria Cross of the Indian

Army. It is called the Dasturi Paltan because it follows orderliness. Robin was thrilled to join this distinguished battalion.

Every battalion has a tradition of its own for these dinners. Most of them include making the young officers down a special ‘punch’, which is a concoction of different spirits. The ‘babies’ of 2 Raj Rif were welcomed with the ‘Raj Rif punch’, which was a large peg of rum mixed with a large peg of whisky, brandy and topped with gin for some flavour. The three boys were asked to gulp it in one go. Robin was a teetotaler but had been mentally preparing for this day for years, so he gulped it down promptly. It had the desired effect on him rather quickly, probably because he had never had a drink in his life. First came the inebriated banter and then the loud singing with a jazz band playing in the background. Finally, all three sat down in a dried-up drain. Robin looked at the officers and said, ‘Jesus Christ will never forgive you for turning me into an alcoholic!’ Out of the other two, Tomar was used to drinking and was the only one in control while Kenguruse had gone completely quiet. Eventually, both Robin and Kenguruse passed out and had to be carried to their rooms.

The next day, they had to report early to join their cross-country team. Robin and Kenguruse were not able to surface, while Tomar habitually woke up right on time and reported. When Robin found out that Tomar had gone on without the other two, he walked up to him and said, ‘Tomar, *tu gaddar hai* [Tomar, you are a traitor]!’ Loyalty is much stressed upon during the training programme at the academy, even if it means taking a hit for your peers. However, Tomar had only found out about their absence when he had reached the ground. Hence, when Robin jokingly accused him of being a traitor, he smiled in acceptance.

Over the next few days, the young officers were told about the unit’s heritage, traditions, customs and history as part of their induction. 2 Raj Rif was an old unit (180 years old when Robin joined) and had many colours (flags), souvenirs of past battles, and a lot of silver. Just like the academy, the first few days in a battalion come with their own share of ragda. For starters, the newcomers are not allowed to attend the New Year’s Eve party held at the station. They are also made to stay with the troops in the ‘lines’

and not in the officers' accommodation. In addition to that, they are made to be part of all the activities in the lines, just like the other soldiers. From cleaning to doing other odd jobs, Robin participated in every activity enthusiastically. This immediately warmed the men to him. Even when Robin was at the academy, he used to write to his father, telling him how impressed he was with the soldiers. He often worried if he would ever be able to match their standards of physical fitness and stamina. Thus, Robin made the most of this opportunity in getting to know them and treated everyone equally and with respect, which was highly appreciated by the other ranks (ORs). When someone would offer to do his work, Robin would refuse politely and finish it himself. They would sit and eat together as well. They formed a special bond over the next two weeks. It was an excellent exercise, especially considering that they may go to war with these men in the future.

Just after being commissioned, officers tend to take it easy for a while. After a gruelling time at the academy, the relatively relaxed atmosphere puts them at ease. However, Robin continued to put his best foot forward. The battalion was to move to the Valley soon, and so they started training for CI (counterinsurgency) operations in Gwalior itself. To make everyone work as one unit, the commanding officer decided to have a section commander's competition as part of the training. Robin and the others were given full independence to train their men for it.

Whether it was such training exercises or sports matches, Robin continued to strive hard to excel in every task assigned to him, earning a reputation as an earnest and hard-working officer. He would perform his duties with dedication, without cutting clever corners. People would say that he was truly the 'josh type'.

Robin had not been able to call home since he joined the unit. His family was eager to hear from him. So one day, Virender rang up the adjutant, Maj Padmapani Acharya, to inquire about Robin's well-being. The major informed him that Robin was getting along fine. The same evening, Virender received a call from a livid Robin, saying, 'Why did you ring up the adjutant? Please don't call my unit again.' Robin was annoyed because

he thought his father calling to check on him would leave a bad impression on the adjutant. Virender understood his predicament and apologized, and the matter was sorted.

Robin had been assigned to Alpha Company and his company commander was Maj Padmapani Acharya. In peace stations, families can join the officers. The families have an important role to play too. They are a binding force in the unit, and give a sense of togetherness to the battalion. Normally, there are many families in a station, but in January 1999 there was only one lady in the Morar Cantonment, Maj Acharya's wife, Mrs Charulata Acharya, fondly known as Charu. Her husband was a tall officer with a distinct military bearing. Often, Robin and Kenguruse would accompany Acharya, or Archie Sir, as he was fondly called, home from the office. Archie was a thorough professional but also had a good sense of humour and a very pleasant demeanour, which made him very popular. He had a beautiful black retriever named Kajal.

Archie was a few years older than Robin, but Charu was just two years older than him. Thus, the two of them got along famously. Robin and the other youngsters would often be found at Archie's house, with Charu serving them endless cups of tea and coffee. She would often tell them jokingly to leave so that she could spend some quality time with her husband. But the young officers would laugh it off, saying this was their much-needed break from the daily drill. Besides, since Robin was away from his own pet, Kartoos, he loved spending time with Kajal.

On Archie and Charu's anniversary, they announced that they were having a baby. A well-knit family by then, Robin was delighted by the news. After a few days, Charu decided to leave for Hyderabad. That evening, before she left, the young officers went to see her off and gave her a giant teddy bear. Robin told her that they wanted the first gift for the baby to be from their side, hence she must make sure the baby played with it.

Robin had continued to abstain from non-vegetarian food, and Virender had continued to advise him against it. He always insisted that Robin's body

would not get the nutrition it required. Robin would respond saying, ‘Papa, when you come to my *paltan*, I will introduce you to soldiers who are vegetarians, yet they are so tall and strong.’ Thus defeated, Virender would let him be. Robin had immense faith in his beliefs and once he had made up his mind about something, there was little one could do to change it. He religiously followed the routine of offering prayers. He believed that they had played a big role in all his successes and changing the habit was out of the question. Virender supported the habit, since he felt having faith in God was essential and gave one anchorage during trying times.

After Robin had settled in, he decided to visit his aunt, Sweetie, in Jhansi, where her husband was commanding a medium regiment of Bofors. The city was just a short train journey away so it was possible to go and come back in a day. He called her over the phone and told her about his plans. Then, one Sunday he was there. He had asked her to make all her specialities. Sweetie instructed the cooks to feed Robin to his heart’s desire. They made all his favourite dishes, including parathas with dollops of butter, matar paneer, aloo gobi and dal makhani. As he relished the food, Robin told his aunt all about his experiences in the academy and now in his new battalion.

Later that day, Sweetie decided to take Robin around the city to see the famous Jhansi Fort, but being an army officer, Robin requested her to take him to see the Bofors regiment first. He was very excited to see the guns. He clicked some pictures in front of them before accompanying his aunt to the fort.

Robin had told only two people about Naina till now. He wanted to tell his aunt too, but decided against it for fear of his parents getting to know from someone other than him. Thus, while strolling through the stony corridors of the fort, he approached the topic in a different way.

‘Bua, what do you think of a young officer getting married to a senior officer’s daughter?’ he suddenly asked.

Sweetie, who was a bit taken aback, replied, ‘It depends, son, on how well they know each other or each other’s families. It could go either way. Besides, girls are so ambitious these days. Why do you ask?’

‘Just generally, for my friends. But, what can go either way? If the girl is well qualified, she can also work. I don’t think it should be a problem,’ answered Robin.

‘Tell me honestly, Robin, are you talking about yourself?’ asked Sweetie, a tad concerned.

But Robin just laughed it off and they went back to exploring the fort. Robin was wearing a maroon shirt tucked into blue jeans that day and was sporting his favourite pair of Ray-Ban, while Sweetie was in a soft pink salwar kameez. They took some pictures at the fort as well, and when Sweetie squinted in the sunlight, Robin quickly took off his shades and put them on her face. Sweetie looked fondly at her observant nephew. He may have trained hard and been through many challenges at the academy, but his sensitivity and innocence were intact, and she couldn’t be gladder for it. Robin’s trip to Jhansi ended with him running after the train and catching it in the nick of time. As the train left the station, he waved at Sweetie and promised to try to visit one more time before leaving.

But that was not to be, as Sweetie herself had to leave Jhansi in the near future. They met at the Gwalior station instead, when her train stopped there for a few minutes. They had barely exchanged a few words when the train started chugging, with Robin running alongside. Suddenly, as if on cue, it stopped just outside the platform. Robin held her feet and stood there, while she kept asking him to leave. He assured her he would leave as soon as the train started again. It was this affectionate side of Robin that made him win the hearts of all around him.

The time of departure of the unit was fast approaching too. They began the back-breaking job of packing, segregating all the stuff that was not required in a field station and making load tables. Robin also filled a trunk with his heavy equipment that he wanted to leave behind in Delhi, including his favourite 25-watt music system. Once the packing was complete, they waited for the rolling stock. Tomar was away on leave at that time and was to join them in Jammu. The families had all gone to their respective hometowns.

2 Raj Rif was ready to move to its next stop—Kupwara.



CHAPTER 15

A One-Way Journey

Till the 1990s, a train carrying a military unit was called a ‘military special’. In reality, there was nothing special about it. It had one first-class bogie for officers, a few normal bogies for the troops and freight cars. A few of these were used to cook while on the move, otherwise it would be done on the side of the tracks when the train stopped in an open field. It was also an opportunity for troops to take a bath. The train would also have half wagons on which vehicles would be loaded. The military special carrying 2 Raj Rif was no exception. Generally, a military special would have no fixed timing. It was low on the priority list in the railway schedule and could be stopped wherever convenient.

Before leaving from Gwalior, Robin rang up his mother and told her that their train would leave in the evening and reach Tughlaqabad junction by 7 a.m. the next morning. Virender and Tripta went to Tughlaqabad station around 5 p.m. to inquire when the military special would pull in. The official on duty told them that things were not clear because the train had not yet left Gwalior. He told them that he would inform them of its progress. They returned home and waited till 9 a.m. the next morning but heard nothing from him. Virender made another call of inquiry. Unfortunately, the official had finished his shift and left. Thus, he was shocked when the new person said that the train had arrived some time ago!

Virender and Tripta quickly loaded their car with goodies for Robin and his comrades and left for the station. Meanwhile, Robin was already at the Tughlaqabad station and was livid at not finding them there. After waiting for some time, he lugged his trunk to the exit, hired a three-wheeler and

gave the driver directions to his house. They even crossed each other on the busy Mathura Road. With no way to contact each other, his parents only learnt of it upon reaching the station. Lt Kenguruse helped Tripta carry the suitcase full of sweets and other eatables to the train. They then decided that Tripta would stay behind while Virender would go back to fetch Robin.

By then, Robin had reached home. Birdie opened the door to find his brother standing in his uniform, his trunk by his side. The brothers hugged each other and then Robin asked about his parents. Learning about the mix-up, Robin let out a flurry of abuses. Not used to hearing his gentle and soft-spoken brother use this kind of language, Birdie was taken aback and said, 'Since when do you speak like this, Robin?' Smiling sheepishly, Robin replied, 'We get used to it at the paltan, yaar.'

After sitting with his brother for a little while, Robin bade him a hurried farewell. He was disappointed and annoyed at missing his parents, but decided to meet his Mamaji, who stayed close by with his aunt now. She had broken her hip recently, and hence he was keen to meet her.

The minute Mamaji's eyes rested on her grandson, her face lit up. How handsome her grandson looked in uniform. A warm smile lifted the corners of her mouth and she held out her arms to embrace him. He almost ran in her direction and hugged her tightly. She stuffed his pockets with his favourite chocolates, which she had been collecting for him. They didn't have a lot of time. She showered him with love and blessings and then kissed him goodbye, wishing him luck and asking him to be careful in the same breath.

Robin now headed back to the railway station, which was forty minutes away. Unfortunately, Virender was still on his way and once again they missed each other. After learning from Birdie that Robin had already left, Virender hurried back to the station.

He reached on time and met his son, who had reached just minutes ago. On one side of the railway track, a tent had been set up with camp chairs and tables. The families of other officers like Lt Col Ravindranath, Maj Vivek Gupta, Capt Mohit and Capt Umed Singh had come together to cut the big cake brought by Robin's parents. The message on the cake read,

‘Good Luck, 2 Raj Rif.’ As a surprise, Virender had brought along his Canon camera. Robin had always had his eye on it, but Virender had been very possessive of it. To his son’s delight, he handed it over to Robin so he could take pictures of the scenic place he was going to. Virender then went on to advise his son about being extra careful in insurgency areas, though Robin registered little in the excitement of his new possession.

Soon after, the bugle was sounded. Vivek rushed in and informed everyone that the line was clear and it was time to leave. The Thapars bid goodbye to each other as the train blew its horn. Robin stood on the platform for as long as he could, as if not wanting to let go. But he had to. He hopped on and stood at the door, waving till his parents were out of sight. Tripta held back her tears and waved back.

But a military special is a military special. At about 3 p.m., Virender received a call from Robin. The train had stopped at Minto Bridge. At 10 p.m., they got another call from their son. The train still hadn’t moved. Robin told them that all the officers had been invited for dinner by another officer of 2 Raj Rif, who, at the time, was posted in Delhi. Robin asked his parents to come down and join them. However, it was too late, so they decided to give it a miss. All the old and new officers spent a warm and fun-filled evening at Maj Kala’s home. He was due to join the regiment later in the Valley and this was the first time he was meeting the newly commissioned officers. Both Robin and Kenguruse seemed shy at first, but as the evening progressed, owing to the warmth and hospitality of their hosts, they opened up. The evening ended on a high note, with the officers singing and having a nice time together, just like a close-knit family. Since the unit was on its way to a conflict area, Maj Kala was happy to see their spirit of camaraderie.

At 9 a.m. the next day, Virender again received a call from Shakurbasti. The train had stopped there and a sister Raj Rif battalion was hosting breakfast for them. Looking at the pattern the train was following, Robin also called his cousin Tonny. He figured that it would pass through Punjab and inevitably be stalled again, so he could spend some quality time with his dear cousin. Tonny and Robin had shared a fun relationship since

childhood. They had always pulled each other's leg and played pranks. So when Tonny answered the phone, Robin said, 'I love you!' He was calling after a long time and wasn't sure if she would even recognize his voice.

'*Bakwass mat kar. Kya hua bata* [Don't talk nonsense. Come to the point]?' said Tonny, instantly recognizing her cousin's voice.

'I meant, I am deeply in love. I met the perfect girl. She is beautiful, I will tell you all about her,' Robin said with a chuckle. They didn't need to exchange pleasantries or make small talk.

'Wow! Okay, but when?' asked Tonny, her curiosity piqued.

'Now. I am on my way to Ludhiana. We are in the military special on the way to Jammu and it will stop there for sure. You reach the station in a couple of hours and get aloo parathas for me and my friends. Get Basanti too!' said Robin, teasing Tonny. Her husband hailed from a small town near Chandigarh. So Robin would often tell her that since she now belonged to a village, her daughter should be rightfully named 'Basanti' after the character of a village girl in the famous Hindi movie *Sholay*.

'I will be there with your parathas. Come soon. And her name is Mannat!' Tonny said excitedly, making Robin burst out into laughter.

'See you guys soon,' Robin said before replacing the receiver. He was the apple of everyone's eye in the family and no one could ever refuse him anything.

Calculating the approximate time at which the train would reach Ludhiana, as they didn't have many details, Tonny duly reached the station with her husband and daughter. She had spent quite a lot of time in the kitchen making as many parathas as she could, hoping they would suffice for everyone. Once at the station, they waited and waited but there was no announcement of a military special. Checking with the authorities proved to be futile, as they didn't know much either. Thus, after spending two to three hours at the station, she returned home thoroughly disappointed.

Suddenly the phone rang and Tonny leapt towards it. Sure enough, it was Robin.

'I have just reached,' he said.

‘Oh! We waited for hours. But there was no information, so we came home,’ she said sullenly.

‘I can understand. Should I come? I will have to get back in an hour,’ Robin said, trying to make up for the missed opportunity.

‘No, Robin, don’t be silly. You won’t be able to get back in time. I had got your parathas, though,’ Tonny said.

‘Sorry, yaar. Don’t worry, we will meet soon. Do you know where I am going? Kashmir. Anything can happen there. I will get to see some action,’ Robin said.

‘Listen, just be careful. Don’t get carried away in your quest to be a hero!’ cautioned Tonny, the tone of her voice becoming stern.

‘Tell me something. I will be in the heat of things. Do you think I will win an award? What if I win a posthumous one?’ said Robin for reasons only he knew best.

‘Can you please stop talking nonse . . .’ Before Tonny could complete the sentence the line went blank, leaving her with a heavy heart.

The wind gods pushed the train in the right direction and it sped towards Jammu without any glitches. Sub Kuldeep Singh looked on as Maj Vivek Gupta and Robin sang and cracked jokes all through the journey.

In Jammu, they were joined by Tomar. The unit was to stay in BD Bari for four to five days before reloading the trucks and proceeding to Khrew for their pre-induction (counter-insurgency operations) training.

By this time, Robin and the other officers had developed a strong bond. He had spent quite some time with Archie and there was mutual brotherliness. Slowly, he developed a relationship with Tomar too as they were course mates. Kenguruse wasn’t one to talk much. Thus, one evening, soon after reaching Jammu, Robin decided to tell his peers about Naina, starting with Tomar. The story resonated with everyone and it was decided they would help out the young officer. After learning that she stayed in Jammu, they didn’t waste any time in getting the ball rolling.

It was decided that Robin would meet his lady-love to get her phone number and address, so he could call her and write to her from the Valley. The gang, comprising Maj Vivek Gupta, Lt Kenguruse, Lt Tomar and Robin, made it priority number one. The very next day, in the evening, they called for the military vehicle known as a *dhai* (two and a half) ton and loaded themselves up. Since Robin was shy of landing up at her doorstep alone, the officers decided to go along for ‘moral support’. Once they reached her colony, Robin guided them to her block and asked them to stay in the vehicle while he went up to her house alone. She stayed on the first floor. He promised to be back in fifteen minutes, so they parked the vehicle on the side of the road. They tried their best to be patient, but fifteen minutes turned into forty-five minutes and their collective patience ran out. Besides, three uniformed officers waiting by the side of the road were drawing undue attention from evening joggers, which made the situation even more uncomfortable.

Finally, they decided to go up to the house to see what had become of Robin. It turned out Naina’s mother and younger brother were at home, so Robin had not got an opportunity to talk to her. Thankfully, they had come to his rescue. Her mother invited them inside while sweetly scolding Robin for not telling her that the others were waiting downstairs. The heroes of 2 Raj Rif saved the day by distracting her mother so that Robin could have an actual conversation with Naina. Soon, all of them got into the *dhai* ton again and went back to BD Bari. During the journey, he was subjected to a lot of leg-pulling and questions. But a happy and content Robin had no problems in facing them all.

It was now time for the unit to move. They were to spend a month in Khrew for their pre-induction training at the Corps Battle School. The conversations during the journey with other fellow officers and jawans like L/Nk Mahendar Singh only made the intentions of Robin and the other officers very clear. He was highly motivated and focused. The thought of

being able to do what he had been trained for filled him with a feeling of accomplishment.

On reaching Khrew, he got down from the vehicle, deeply inhaled the fresh air of the Valley and looked around at the picturesque surroundings. He was here now. This was where he had wanted to be for as long as he could remember. He wanted to give it his best and make his parents and country proud. There was not even a trace of fear on his face. He knew he had trained himself well and the time to prove it was finally here.

At Khrew, they were joined by the then 2IC (second-in-command), Maj Sandeep Bajaj. As per protocol, the young officers were marched up to his office soon after their arrival for introductions. Maj Bajaj was a serious man, with his energies focused on the job. After meeting the three new officers, he knew that they would prove to be an asset to the paltan. Each one brought something different to the table. If Tomar had a thorough understanding of the system due to his training at the NDA, Kenguruse brought a quiet sincerity. Robin, he understood, was the life of the lot. Not only was he self-motivated and highly spirited, his willingness to learn from his seniors and juniors made him stand out. Maj Bajaj greatly appreciated his ambition to do well in his career.

There was little time to waste, so the unit started training on the very first day. The boys were kept busy throughout with drills, exercises and competitions that were designed to push them to do better. Robin, just like in the academy, continued to take great initiative and pushed himself to do better than his peers. They had little time to rest, but he never cribbed or complained about the tasks. He saw it as an opportunity to hone his skills.

One of the most important aspects of life in the army, whether one is posted in a peace or a conflict area, is the ability to be able to take some time off and have fun. A uniformed man cannot afford to let the pressures and demands of his job get to him. The consequences can be disastrous. Hence, most officers and jawans are equipped with the ability to make light of even the gravest situations. For young officers of their age and service, the one way of enjoying themselves was to meet and spend time with their course mates or friends, which would often lead to much exuberance and

sometimes mischief. Thus, when Robin and Tomar found out that some of their course mates were in a neighbouring unit, 17 Jat, they decided to pay them a visit. Since it was a highly sensitive area, the rules didn't allow them to leave the premises for too long. Nevertheless, both the officers left one Sunday morning with the intention of spending just a few hours with their friends in 17 Jat. However, once there, they overshot the stipulated time limit and realized that they were going to invite a good earful for being late. Robin, not wanting to upset his senior, told Tomar that they should head back immediately. Tomar, on the other hand, realizing that their fate was now sealed, convinced Robin to stay a while longer, return in the evening and take whatever punishment that would be given to them. It did make sense, Robin thought. Sure enough, it turned out to be one of the first times that Robin was told off and asked to join an intelligence cadre for two weeks. That they took it all in their stride, with bowed but smiling faces, was another matter.

The arrival of their junior, Lt Rautela, also gave them some much-needed merriment. He had graduated from the Officers Training Academy, so he was three months junior to the present lot of junior-most officers. The joining of a junior officer often brings about changes in the dynamics for his immediate seniors, as it did for Robin and his friends. They were now a step higher in the hierarchical structure. The thrill of seeing someone else in the position that they were in a few months ago gave them an odd sense of satisfaction. After all, they, too, were senior subalterns to someone now. Thus, as soon as Lt Rautela arrived, all three of them went to talk to him. Since Rautela had joined in a conflict area, welcoming him in the traditional way—involving pranks—was not possible. That, however, was not going to keep his seniors from creating some mischief.

Robin, deciding to take charge, said in a firm voice, 'So, what can you do for the unit?'

'Whatever you say, Sir,' Rautela replied confidently.

'Give me fifty push-ups on your knuckles,' said Robin, taking a no-nonsense approach.

Rautela immediately got on his knuckles and finished them in no time. Being fresh from the academy, he was fit to the hilt, which impressed his seniors. They let him go after that. Though they were in the field, some traditions had to be followed. And so Rautela was invited to the ‘dining-in’ at the officers’ mess.

He was assigned to Bravo (B) Company. On the eve of the ‘dining-in’, Company Havildar Major (CHM) Mahinder Sahib walked into his room and asked him to have half a bowl of butter. When Rautela asked why, he replied ‘*Aaj apko pilayenge toh company ka naak nahin katna chahiye* [When they get you drunk today, you shouldn’t bring the company’s name down].’

‘*Naak katna matlab* [What do you mean]? asked Rautela, puzzled.

‘*Aap peeke gir jaoge toh company ki bezzati hogi na. Aap butter khake jao* [If you get drunk and pass out, the company will be let down. So have butter and go].’

Before Rautela could make more sense of the situation, Robin called out to him. Not able to resist, he had decided to play a small prank on him. ‘Come here. Today, in your dining-in, you have to come marching in and sing “Nanha munna rahi hu, desh ka sipahi hu”.’

One of the first things taught in the army is to follow orders. Thus, as soon as the sun set, a young and dashing Rautela marched in smartly and to the delight of the pranksters, broke into song. After everyone had had a hearty laugh, welcoming him warmly, he was ready for the legendary punch! The only twist was that he was asked to say, ‘*Veer Bhogye Vasundhara*’, the unit’s war cry, after drinking it. To their surprise, unlike his immediate seniors, he did both without wavering. Rautela was initiated into the unit.

The commanding officer’s instructions were clear. The unit was in a counter-insurgency area so no officer would be made to drink more alcohol than he could handle. Hence, to the utter disappointment of the trio, even though Rautela stood straight even after two glasses of the punch, he couldn’t be offered more. However, he wasn’t as simple as his seniors had been. His CHM had prepared him for this eventuality after Robin had left

earlier in the evening. Thus, as soon as he realized that the idea was to see him drunk, even though he didn't feel it, he cleverly started acting drunk! But Robin wasn't to be fooled easily and caught his bluff. That day, Robin christened Rautela 'Sun Tzu', because he felt he could deal with any challenge given to him.

The night ended with them deciding to take Rautela back to their accommodation, rather than letting him go to the lines in the state he was in. Jokes aside, he was an officer worthy of the respect of his men, and no compromise can ever be made in that matter. The men could not see him in that state, so they put him on the upper bunk bed. While his seniors discussed the happenings of the evening and laughed their hearts out, Rautela drifted off to sleep.

Soon, the time in the training school came to an end. Before heading to their operational destination, Kupwara, the youngsters were due to take their promotional Part B exams. As always, Robin started preparing for it seriously and sincerely.



CHAPTER 16

Beyond Love

The last part of the training took the company to their final destination, Kupwara. They were now inducted into the counter-insurgency operations and kept busy with activities such as forty-eight-hour ambushes, seventy-two-hour patrolling, area-domination patrol and cordon-and-search operations.

The road from Srinagar to Handwara and on to Kupwara is lined with beautiful apple orchards, where the trees are heavy with the pinkish-green fruit. The orchards embrace lush green paddy fields with chinar trees, the hallmark of Kashmir. On the fringes are low hills covered with pine trees. Most villagers, who work in the apple orchards or fields, live in hutments made of wood and mud. There are affluent apple dealers too, but most of the population is poor and makes its earning by picking up apples, packing them in wooden crates and loading them into trucks to be transported to wholesale markets. Some trucks travel as far as Chandigarh and Delhi. The place is steeped in the heady aroma of apples. It's a peaceful setting, with tufts of smoke rising from the chimneys of huts in the small villages, and in the soothing silence one can hear the sound of rustling leaves. Remote and cut off, this area is immensely refreshing with nature at its most pristine.

But this picture of peace and placid tranquillity is deceptive. It hides the violence and the resultant deaths, which is why Kupwara is associated with gunfire, militancy and tragedy. The situation is ironical. Unfortunately, this beautiful area lies on the various routes that terrorist gangs like Jaish-e-Mohammed or Lashkar-e-Taiba take while descending from Pakistan to the Valley and beyond. Every now and then, in the darkness of the night, there

are clashes between the forces and insurgents. Many terrorists have been killed here, but sometimes soldiers and even innocent civilians have had to bear the brunt. Most locals just want to live peacefully, earning just enough to make ends meet, but there are a few who are sympathetic to the cause of the terrorists and help them. They provide them shelter, food, information and cover, sometimes at gunpoint, sometimes to make a fast buck or just to settle old scores. But often innocent people become collateral damage of the conflict. Sadly, a whole generation of kids has grown up with this violence and become indifferent to firing, weapons and death. They have lost their childhood and become sullen, solemn and silent. The beauty of nature and the brutality of humans coexist here.

To keep a check on insurgency, troops have been deployed on hilltops and along the roads. The army posts with watchtowers and bunkers are as much part of the landscape as the villages with their masjids and huts.

In February 1999, helmet-wearing soldiers in grey jeeps and Casper's trucks—reinforced with steel plates—were all over the region but locals paid them no heed. Robin's battalion moved into the area of Kigam, a hotspot for operations. The companies were deployed to cover a vast area—Chak Natnusa, Kantapur, Madnan, Bodhbal, Kandi, Tarach and Tarats. He was thankful for the opportunity to train in Khrew. This was also when he spent all his time with the troops rather than with his fellow officers. When not at work, they would pass time listening to music. Robin's favourites were songs from the war movie *Border*.

He loved clicking pictures too. One day, he took many pictures with his commanding officer in various poses. After some time, to his embarrassment, he discovered that there was no film in the camera! Virender became the target of his angry outburst on the phone. 'Papa,' he said angrily, 'couldn't you have loaded a film in the camera before giving it to me?' Later, a new film was bought and they clicked many pictures of Robin in his uniform and patka. He stood in front of the camera and asked, 'Do I look like a commando or not?'

From day one, they got busy patrolling, cordoning and searching, and conducting ambushes. Robin wrote a letter to his father describing life in

Kupwara as tough, full of tension and daily challenges, with death lurking in the dark. They had to move with extreme caution, be alert and make sure they did not make the slightest noise. They changed their routes and time of going out frequently. In fact, by now Robin had grown a beard and had started calling himself 'Sher Khan with a beard' from his favourite children's book *The Jungle Book*.

In a letter dated 3 April 1999, he wrote about an encounter in which about thirty bullets were fired at him during an operation. Anything could happen at any time, he wrote. In his reply, his father advised him to be focused on the ongoing operation and not be distracted in counting bullets! That day Robin had been 'baptized under fire'. The dictum of infantry school that 'a bullet fired by the enemy teaches one more than all the training manuals' holds true in all instances.

The operations went on and on without any results, as the militants always gave them the slip. There had been nine contacts. Whenever a patrolling party sees or has a brush with a terrorist group, it is known as a contact. It doesn't always result in action. Then, one day, news of militants in the area reached the headquarters, and a hasty plan was made. The boys had seen all this happen many times and had got used to the routine. They would receive information, men would be quickly assembled and briefed. They would wait in ambush, lying there for hours, and come back without a thing. This time, Robin was already on a patrol with his platoon, and they were diverted from the west to an area where the group was to be intercepted. Maj Vivek with his troops closed in from the north, while another group with Mohit and Rautela moved in from the east to encircle the terrorists. They knew the area like the back of their hand. The operation went on for hours as the group and the force engaged in a cat-and-mouse game. They came close to the group as it crossed a stream some distance away. Electrified, Robin with his platoon was asked by Maj Vivek, who had reported a contact, to close in fast and reach a hut that was on a higher ground, like an island in the sea of flat paddy fields.

In the meantime, the terrorist group sensed a threat approaching from its left and quickly started moving eastwards. There was deathly silence,

except for dogs barking in the distance. In the wee hours, the silence was shattered by the sound of a long burst of fire and a few more shots some distance away. Everyone was on high alert. It sounded as though there had been a kill. A few moments later, the radio crackled to life. There was a suppressed cheer as they learnt that they had shot at the terrorists and the operation had succeeded. One body was recovered and the blood trail leading towards the village revealed that two more had been wounded. Robin saw the terrorist lying in an awkward position. He was dazed. He had seen a man shot dead for the first time. 'Is this what separates life from death—a moment, a bullet?' he wondered. He stood there staring blankly, thinking these were men who had wanted to kill him.

The AK-47s were lying uselessly next to his hand. The tall man had received three hits, one of which had shattered his face. His long hair and clothes were drenched in blood. Robin had seen it all that day. The body was removed to the police station and the documentation completed. Meanwhile, Robin went after the wounded ones. But they had vanished.

Robin then reported another contact, and operations were launched with A and D companies. But after much combing, the operations were called off. Life went on in the same way after that, filled with more patrolling, more ambushes, more cordons and more frustration. Sometimes there were engagements, which resulted in ambushes and fedayeen killed. The terrorists were very well equipped, sometimes with night-vision and GPS devices, concentrated food items and walkie-talkies.

Often, there would be a period of inactivity. On 24 April 1999, a call was received, and once again an operation was launched. This time it was the Alpha Company with Maj Padmapani Acharya (Archie) leading, with one JCO and forty other ranks, and Robin, his second-in-command. There had been information of four terrorists hiding in a few huts in the remote village of Watankhai on the fringes of the Shalabat forest. Archie gulped down the last of his Old Monk, wiped his moustache and said, 'So Robin, this time the bastards are going to get it. What do you say?'

'We will get them, and, Sir, make sure I get my medal,' said Robin.

'Sure, Robin,' said Archie reassuringly.

Once again, they set off on a mission that would test their skills and nerves. After trudging through the forested area and paddy fields for more than three hours, they reached a thick clump of trees just touching the village. In small groups led by Hav Rageshwar Badhuria and Hav Ramkailash, they moved stealthily to the right and the left, while Rfn Rishikesh and Satish accompanied Robin. There was absolute silence. All Robin could see was the white of their eyeballs. He felt his heartbeat quicken as he took position and aimed his AK-47 at the door of the house to the left. They had surrounded the village successfully. On the other side, Archie with his party was moving very carefully. Robin's party was covering them and the possible escape routes.

Robin was worried about Archie's safety. It was past midnight by now and the dogs in the surrounding areas were still howling. They were all alert, like a pack of wolves, ready to pounce. They had their guns ready. Sweat poured down their foreheads, and they held their breath to be as quiet as possible. Cicadas were making a din. Archie's group was closing in on the huts now. Tension was running high among the men. Every moving leaf startled them. The men checked and rechecked their safety catches. This wait was killing them.

Robin's mind was on Archie and him being too close to danger. He vowed he would do everything in his power to prevent harm coming his way. In the midst of these thoughts, suddenly there was a loud bang as the window of the neighbouring hut flew open, letting out a shaft of light. With a loud hoot, a bird flew out, flapping its wings noisily. Right then, the tense men around Robin opened heavy fire. Robin shouted to control the charged-up troops and restore order. While Archie and his men ran around the hut, Robin and his team charged from the front. They kicked the door open and rushed in but all they found was a frightened couple staring at them. They were yelping incoherently. In the melee, the insurgents had fled from a rear window.

Robin felt shattered and defeated. Archie tried to cheer him up. 'Come on, Robin, there will be another chance.' Once the seniors—the

commanding officer and the second-in-command—were informed, they were unhappy at the outcome and would not listen to the reasons.

The men who had opened fire were taken to task. Robin was livid about the incident and also about the fact that the commanding officer had heard the version of those who had no idea of what had happened but would not listen to them. A few days later, his father in Bathinda got a call from a deeply hurt Robin. His father heard him out and then patiently and duly pacified him. He assured him that he was right and whatever had happened was an accident and not his fault. He explained that it was the duty of the commanding officer and the second-in-command to set things right so that future endeavours could be successful. Somewhat pacified, Robin also discussed his plans for his casual leave to attend his cousin's marriage at the end of June.

Virender was proud of his son's achievements, but often worried about his safety. Robin's letters would be emotionally charged and describe how he was ready for action. As an army officer, his chest would swell with pride, but the father in him worried about his son's well-being. He always made sure to write back, appreciating his enthusiasm, never forgetting to add a word of caution and finishing with words of wisdom.

Meanwhile, the list of people whom Robin wrote to had become slightly longer. It now included his course mates from the academy, like Kalia and the others, as well as his beloved, who was waiting for him in Jammu. While letters from his course mates would reach him promptly, those from Naina would be withheld by Tomar, who would demand sweets in exchange. Robin would be only too happy to comply.

In Kupwara, their company camped in an empty school building. It had a lush green meadow-like playfield in front, surrounded by dense trees. A narrow motorable road wound its way around it. A few hundred yards away, across the road, lay a small hamlet with a few huts.

The regimental medical officer at the camp would provide free treatment to anyone in the area, including locals. So there was always a crowd around

his tent where a Red Cross flag fluttered lazily on a long pole.

A hut stood all by itself a little distance away from the village and close to the school. Outside it, there would be small kids with bright eyes in oversized and dishevelled clothes, running after roosters and pet dogs. Logs, empty containers and assorted things would lie around scattered. This was Akhtar's hut. He was a woodcutter who lived there with his family: his wife Aameena, a sweet little daughter he had lovingly named Ruksana and a baby boy. A tough-looking man with rugged and broad shoulders, Akhtar worked very hard but was poor. His work did not fetch much money, but the family made the best of whatever it had. They were happy and content, never forgetting to thank Allah for His mercy. Since his hut was close to the army camp, Akhtar would sometimes pick up odd jobs, in return for which the troops would give him lunch.

If Akhtar was lucky, he earned a day's wages as a casual labourer. Sometimes he took the local bus to the town to get household essentials. During these trips, he would always bring back small plastic toys or sweets for Ruksana. When he would return, she would jump up and cling to her father, dangling from his neck. He would hug her and play with her. The girl would be beside herself with joy when her father lifted her up and put his arms around her. She was the light of his life. After dinner, he would gently pick her up, kiss her and put her to bed, covering her up with a coarse bedcover. Sometimes he would tell her a bedtime story till she dozed off.

That had been a year before Robin's unit was at the camp. By the time they arrived, life had taken a tragic turn and had robbed Ruksana of her father. She felt desolate, lonely and started keeping to herself. Gradually, she withdrew into herself and stopped talking.

When Robin went out for errands, his path would take him past the hut. He would see a sullen girl standing there, quite different from the other girls her age. She would look distant and lost. He would wave at her but she wouldn't react. Her large, beautiful eyes would follow him with a look of curiosity. After a few days, Robin decided to talk to her.

'Hello', he said and sat down next to her.

She looked away shyly and shifted her position a little.

Robin took out a bar of chocolate from his pocket, which he usually carried for himself, and offered it to her. After some coaxing, she accepted it and ran away.

After that day, Robin started to carry a bar of chocolate or candies whenever he went past the hut and offered them to her. It broke her guard and she gradually got used to Robin and seemed comfortable around him. There wasn't much to do in the evenings when operations were not on. To overcome his boredom, he and his buddy, L/Nk Jagmal Singh, would go and spend some time playing with the little girl. After many such days, Ruksana gave him a faint smile and eventually started smiling heartily when they played with her.

Robin learnt her name and started to call her by it. As the days passed, their friendship grew and she would look forward to Robin's visits. Robin was intrigued by her silence. One day, he asked her aunt whether the girl was mute. 'There was nothing wrong with her till tragedy struck her family and she stopped talking,' said the aunt. She went on to narrate the gory events of the terrible night a year ago that destroyed her happy life.

That year, summer was a particularly scorching one. Ruksana and her family had taken a trip to Handwara. But there was trouble brewing in Kashmir. There were whispers about a group of terrorists hiding in the nearby hills across the Jhelum. The family, however, had nothing to do with it and never discussed it. Akhtar would be busy working through the day, and ignored the growing uneasiness that came over the people of the area. The terrorists had been there for many days now. They were restless and always on edge.

One day, past midnight, there was violent banging on the door. The old hinges gave way and the rickety door broke open. The silhouettes of Akhtar, his wife and Ruksana were outlined in the dim light. They were huddled together in one corner of the hut, shaking with fear. Standing before them were two armed men, wearing army fatigues, their long, unkempt hair partly covered with flat caps. They had pale, unshaven faces. The younger one, who appeared to be the leader, menacingly pointed his

AK-47 at Akhtar. He roughly pushed Ruksana and her mother to one corner and dragged her father to the other.

‘So you are the pig who tipped off the army about us,’ he glowered.

‘No, sir, surely there has been some confusion. I swear by Allah, the Benefactor, I am only a poor labourer. I have nothing to do with all this,’ said Akhtar as he fell at their feet. Tears streamed down his cheeks as he pleaded, ‘Sir, I am innocent.’ Ruksana and her mother tried to protect him but were pushed aside roughly. Suddenly, the second man gave a blood-curdling yell and fired a short burst from his gun. Akhtar fell on his back, dead. They left as quickly and quietly as they had come with a warning, ‘This will happen to anyone who works against us.’ They didn’t look back to see the havoc they had wreaked. The mother and child were left wailing and shrieking for help, looking towards the Almighty. The evil men had melted into the darkness. The neighbours did not even stir out of fear. Her mother tried to wrap Akhtar’s head in her dupatta in a desperate attempt to stop the bleeding. But it was of no use. He was dead. A stunned Ruksana became oblivious to everything around her, including the loud screams of her mother.

Almost an hour after the tragedy, Ameena’s sister entered the hut and started howling loudly. After regaining her composure, she tried to pacify her sister and gathered Ruksana in her arms, but the girl was stiff and unresponsive. In the wee hours, the entire village gathered to console her. The men sat in groups, cursing the terrorists. The women got busy with cleaning the floor and consoling Ameena, making her drink water. A clean sheet was spread out, and Akhtar’s body was laid on it and covered with another sheet. The little girl, shocked beyond belief, slid into a dark corner of the hut and stood motionless like a statue. Nobody remembered her in the melee. Her friend’s mother saw her standing alone, took her in her lap and tried to talk to her, but the child didn’t speak or cry. She saw the same people again the next day as they gathered to take her father on a cot covered with a shiny green shroud, flowers and some other decorative bunting. He was buried in a grove by the shores of a small lake. Her life, which had been so full of happiness and love, had become empty. She had

seen it all happen right in front of her. Her father's distorted face, his eyes wide open with fear and the stream of blood flowing out of his body continued to haunt her in the days to come. The echo of the shots would reverberate in her ears, along with that beastly yell. And then fear would grip her. She started keeping to herself and eventually withdrew completely. People around her tried to cheer her up but finally gave up.

The story shook Robin to the core. He decided to do whatever he could for little Ruksana. He gave Aameena some money and told her that he would take care of the child.

He thought it was important for his parents to know about his decision. Hence, he called Tripta and said, 'Mama, I want you to get some clothes stitched for a girl here.'

Her mother was taken aback and asked, 'Who is she?'

'Oh, come on Mama, she is a little girl. Comes up to my knees,' said Robin, smiling at his mother's confusion.

'Ah,' said his mother, relieved. 'Don't worry. I will keep them ready and you can take them when you come in June. It's May already.'

A few days later, Robin's family got a letter from him telling them that he was giving financial aid to a little girl named Ruksana. They weren't surprised, since helping the underprivileged wasn't new for Robin.

He also started visiting her often. He would often persuade her to tell him her name. Then one day, after asking her repeatedly, she whispered, 'Ruksana.' After that, she started replying to his questions in monosyllables. One day, Robin asked her if she would like to go to school. Visibly excited, she said, 'Yes.'

Unfortunately, their beautiful relationship ended rather abruptly when Robin's unit was ordered to move to Drass, where high-intensity fighting had broken out. The next morning, the unit loaded into trucks and moved out, leaving Ruksana behind. They would never meet again. Robin carried the memories of the little girl with him. It's only now that he understood the reality of the lives of the people caught in the conflict.



CHAPTER 17

A Battle to Remember

The unit was to operate at 16,000 feet. The commanding officer was keen to take fourteen days for acclimatization of his unit, but on 3 June they received orders for the attack that was to take place on 12–13 June. Nonetheless, the time spent at Sonmarg and Matayan was used to acclimatize.

The unit spent its days in Sonmarg arming the grenades and maintaining its firearms. Everyone was also made to do mountain climbing so that their bodies got used to the altitude and climate. The officers used this opportunity to interact and bond with each other and their men. Once in a while, the officers would get together and go to the nearby market to eat and pass some time. One day, after finishing their daily exercises, a group of officers—Maj Vivek Gupta, Maj Acharya, Lt Kenguruse, Lt Tomar and Robin—decided to go to the market to have a quick bite. On reaching there, everyone declared that they had forgotten their wallets at the base, except Tomar. But this didn't dampen their spirits. They borrowed from him and had a hearty time. Each promised to pay him back later, saying, 'We owe you.' They spent Rs 450 that day, an amount that has since been etched in Tomar's heart as a debt that remained unpaid forever.

After three days in Sonmarg, the unit moved to Matayan, where they stayed until they moved again for the attack. Life in the tented camp at Matayan revolved around mundane activities, which was a bit annoying for everyone. Every day the officers and the soldiers would strap on their backpacks and go up a mountain, returning to firing practice and weapon-cleaning. This was their preparation for the battle that lay ahead. The period

between 29 May, when they left Kupwara, and 12 June, when they moved for the attack, was devoid of excitement, as all the action was going on elsewhere. The only activity they witnessed was an odd shell lobbed by the Pakistan Army, exploding close by. The headquarters of 56 Mountain Brigade, commanded by Brig Amar Aul, was located in Drass, from where one could hear and see the shells exploding and the machine guns firing. Some NCOs who had been there said that the scene made their blood run cold. Brigade headquarters had been a target of enemy guns.

‘All the exciting action is going on just a few kilometres away, and we are sitting here in Matayan, cleaning rifles and grenades,’ Robin would often complain. Some drivers had informed them that a petrol tanker had been hit by Pakistani artillery and exploded. The few houses in the lush and verdant green fields of Drass had been destroyed.

The villagers in the area look forward to summer. It is liberating as they remain cooped up in their little hutments during the cold winter months when the temperature falls to minus 35 degrees. But the ongoing operations had robbed them of this happiness. In mortal fear of their lives, they had moved out with their children and cattle to safer areas, leaving their houses behind. Pakistani soldiers were close by and some villagers claimed to have seen them occasionally.

Near the Raj Rif camp was a helipad, and VIP visits to 8 Division’s headquarters were subject to much speculation. The caravan of the GOC, Maj Gen Mohinder Puri, was stationed nearby, and he could often be seen going up and down NH1A in a Gypsy with camouflage nets and radio antennas sticking out. Interestingly, Robin did not know then that the corps commander, Lt Gen Krishan Pal, who visited the headquarters, was his father’s course mate in the NDA.

Matayan is an idyllic place for photographers and artists. As one breaks out of Zoji-la, at the height of 11,575 feet, one is struck by breathtaking beauty. A picture-postcard view welcomes everyone, with lush-green valleys, sparkling streams, frothing white waterfalls and majestic snow-capped mountains against a clear blue sky. The Himalayan splendour is at its best here. Beyond the serpentine road lies an almost vertical drop, a

thousand-feet deep, into the fast-flowing river below. A few kilometres away, the road dips and the narrow gorge opens out into a broad valley, offering a splendid view of horses grazing.

This is where 2 Raj Rif had set up camp. Vijyant and Tomar were tent mates. They spent their time talking and reminiscing about the past, in addition to watching endless reruns of their favourite movie, *Top Gun*. They even remembered the dialogues by heart. Filmy music was another weakness and strains of music would emanate from their tent at all hours. They were fed up of thumbing through the same magazines every day.

Robin was an early riser. Despite the cold, he would play 'Hanuman Chalisa' (a devotional hymn) on his Walkman and start exercising. This would annoy Tomar, who would want to sleep some more. Finally, one day, he suggested that Robin change his tent. Robin paid no heed to the plea and the matter blew over.

They talked, sang, ate, cursed and enjoyed their time together. They even had a makeshift band with Kenguruse on the guitar and Rautela on the drums, which were usually pots and pans from the kitchen. Tomar and Robin played the bongo and sang. His favourite songs were 'Niley Niley Amber Par', 'Chalte Chalte Mere Yeh Geet Yaad Rakhna', 'Lemon Tree' and 'Lucky Lips'. Robin had written down their lyrics in his notebook, perhaps to remember the words. When the so-called band would play, the others would beg them to stop.

Often the conversations would steer towards family. During one such session, Tomar noticed that Robin had become forlorn, so he asked, 'Hey, Robin, missing home?'

'Yes, it is 4 p.m. Mama must be having her afternoon siesta; Papa must be at golf; and Birdie must be fooling around with Kartoos. How I miss them,' said Robin.

Their time in the Valley had also got them closer to the jawans. Robin was particularly friendly with the troops, and he would often make small talk and take bites out of their plates. Soldiers always, as a mark of respect, offer their food to the officers before eating it themselves. In such times, the

hierarchy would be forgotten and they would interact like family. Robin especially liked one soldier because he was his father's namesake.

Robin's Canon camera also provided some source of entertainment. He captured beautiful moments and subjects with it, but unfortunately a number of them never got to see the prints. One day, Vivek, Archie and Robin were sitting on the bed in Robin's tent when Kenguruse decided to take a picture. They all seemed so happy. But luck had different plans. None of them, including the photographer, returned.

Finally, their exasperating wait came to an end on 1 June 1999, when 2 Raj Rif received an order to move to Moghulpura. There was excitement all around, and preparations for the battle began. They were supposed to carry out the operation on the night of 12–13 June.

The men were going through a range of emotions: bravado, impatience, apprehension, indifference, fear and aggression. The seniors encouraged the younger lot and asked them to stay positive. Robin secretly dreamt of receiving a bravery award, perhaps a Vir Chakra.

A few days ago, his course mate, Lt Saurabh Kalia, of 4 Jat, who was also a friend, had been killed. His patrol had fallen in the hands of the enemy en route to Bajrang Post in Kaksar. They had been brutally tortured till they could not take it any more. This wanton and gruesome inhumanity had left Robin in a helpless rage. He wanted to get even with these murderers.

For the ensuing battle, he remembered the dagger that Archie and he had got made by a blacksmith in one of the villages and readied that too. There had always been a strong sense of camaraderie between the officers and now their relationship had strengthened as they had spent quite a bit of time together, planning for the task ahead. Robin had started addressing him as 'Tau'.

On 12 June, Robin put on a warm camouflage tracksuit and a down jacket instead of a constraining parka and shirt, so that he could move his arms freely during combat. He also took off his shiny Titan watch, the glint of which could alert the enemy, and replaced it with a drab G-Shock watch.

He may have also tucked Naina's last letter into one of the pockets of his down jacket. After the war, she got all her letters back except this one.

As he went about these mundane activities, the thought of getting killed never crossed his mind. And even if it did, he brushed it away. He was here to fight and kill the enemy. Still, he went to the temple and sought protection from Karni Mata. The unit always established a small temple in a tent wherever they set up camp. It went with them everywhere. The officers and jawans of 2 Raj Rif, including Robin, had immense faith in her powers.

Tololing was a strong position held by 6 Northern Light Infantry (NLI) of the Pakistan Army. It comprised hardy soldiers who were locals of the area and elements of SSG (Special Service Group). It was part of Gen Pervez Musharraf's treacherous but tactically bold plan to put India in a fix. This operation, commonly called 'Op Badr' (also called Koh-e-Paima, meaning 'the one who climbs') by the Pakistan Army, was a pet project of Gen Musharraf and he took pains to see it succeed. The atmosphere of bonhomie and peace post 'Aman ki Yatra' (the bus journey that the Indian prime minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, had made from Delhi to Lahore) had resulted in India lowering its guard. This offered an ideal opportunity to the Pakistan Army to exploit the vast gaps created due to evacuation of the high-altitude posts during winter, which were to be reoccupied as soon as the cold weather receded. This practice was supposed to be followed by both sides. That winter, the Pakistan Army made deep incursions of over 127 kilometres in distance, and a depth of 4 to 10 kilometres in Mushkoh, Drass, Kaksar, Kargil, Batalik and Turtuk. All they had to do was walk in and occupy the Indian posts located on the high mountains overlooking the NH1A. However, this had to be done in the worst of winter. These mountains are difficult to negotiate and completely inaccessible. Sitting at a vantage point, the Pakistan Army thought there was no way it could be evicted and believed it had suitably avenged the loss of Siachen, which the Indian Army had occupied. It was a bold and highly secret move, tactically brilliant but strategically disastrous. Later, there were reports that Gen Musharraf had visited the area across the LoC on two occasions to take

stock of the situation. They had started moving up as early as November 1998 by some accounts and not later, as is commonly believed.

Pakistan had prepared strong defences at high positions that gave them an advantage and had stocked those well. Tololing was the deepest incursion in India's area. As per a Pakistani officer's account, they had named it Azam Post. By the time they had reached Tololing, they were 24 kilometres away from Bunyal near Gultari, their headquarters across the LoC. As per this account, Capt Iftikhar and Maj Azam had established these posts. The going was terribly tough for them but they had established good positions. The Tololing ridgeline consisted of Tololing feature, including Point 4590, Tololing Top, a flat area between the two called Flat, Barbad Bunker and then echeloned northwards was a feature called Hump. Beyond Hump were a series of hillocks along the ridgeline serially named Hump 1 to Hump 10. North of that was the most dominating feature of this area, Point 5140.

There were two main approaches to attack Tololing from Drass—one along the south-western ridge, which led right up to Point 4590, and the other along the south-eastern ridge, which led to Tololing Top. Initially, 18 Grenadiers had been tasked with clearing Tololing. Their operations began on 22 May 1999, supported by 16 Grenadiers, who were part of the Holding Battalion. 2 Naga simultaneously commenced operations against Point 5140. These attacks did not succeed due to abysmal intelligence, leading to incorrect assessment of enemy strength and inadequate artillery support. The repeated attacks resulted in many casualties, including Maj Rajesh Adhikari and Lt Col Ramakrishnan Vishwnathan, among others. These setbacks resulted in despondency among the Indian troops. The commanding officer gave instructions to all the officers to keep the men busy, to talk to them and to go to the temple to seek strength. It was a challenge for the officers and JCOs to keep the morale of their men high in such an atmosphere.

On 27 May, there was more crushing news. India had lost a MiG-21 to enemy fire and another to engine flameout. The very next day, an MI-17 helicopter with Wing Commander Rajiv Pundir and six others was shot down by a missile right over Tololing. The enemy had deployed Stinger

missiles and the helicopter did not have flares to counter the heat-seeking missiles.

Finally, on 2 June, 2 Raj Rif was ordered to prepare for a task in either Mushko or Drass. When the Grenadiers' attack failed, 2 Raj Rif was ordered to capture Tololing on 3 June 1999. They were well supported by artillery, which had been deployed by now. An advanced dressing station—a small field hospital in Drass—was the centre of intense activity, where Maj Akhilesh Rao, a young doctor, had his hands full. He had to attend to the wounded, the badly wounded, the dying and the dead. The sights and news had a debilitating effect on the troops, making it even more difficult for the commanding officer to keep up their morale. Officers were specifically told to keep the men occupied. Robin had a strict rule for his company. All the men had to learn the Karni Mata *aarti* (hymns) by heart and no one was spared.

Drass is called the gateway to Ladakh. All it had were a few houses and a bazaar—if the line of shops on the side of the road could be called that. All of these shops had been hit and were shut, except for a tea shop run by a man named Nasir Ahmad, who continued to serve tea even during the operations. Shells meant for Tololing sometimes overshot and landed some distance away, causing damage to civilians. At other times, the enemy fired shots randomly to keep nerves on tenterhooks. However, the morale of 2 Raj Rif was sky-high, and they were raring to go. Finally, the unit was ordered to clear Tololing on the night of 12 June. The commanding officer had made thorough preparations, detailed planning and rehearsed his troops well. The artillery plan to support the attack was explained and all loose ends tied up. Robin and Archie took their platoon commanders behind birch saplings for cover and showed them the feature they had to attack. A thorough understanding of the objective was of prime importance. Finally, the commanding officer got the paltan together for a pep talk and said, 'I have given you what you wanted, now give me what I want.' The battalion was excited, rested and eager to go.

It was a two-pronged attack. The attacking company, Charlie Company (C Company) with Maj Vivek Gupta in the lead, was to attack from the

south-eastern approach. Its job was to capture Tololing Top and Flat. Delta Company (D Company), led by Maj Mohit Saxena, was to capture Point 4590 and Rock, including Barbad Bunker on the south-western approach. They moved up to their release points. Sadly for Robin, A Company was not assaulting. It was a reserve for D Company. They were told to move to their designated area. Robin was not happy about being left out. While shelling and firing were going on, Robin, with his company, moved to the waiting area slowly. Even at this time, he played his favourite songs on his little radio to cheer up the men. Troops of C and D Companies at their release points were as anxious as boxers waiting for the gong to sound. Everyone waited for the H-hour with bated breath, which was 2000 hours for D Company and 2030 hours for C Company.

On the clear night of 12 June, 2 Raj Rif, the 'Ever-Victorious Battalion', began the attack that would rewrite military history. At 1900 hours, the sky exploded with deafening bombardment, the likes of which had never been seen before, as 120 Indian artillery guns unleashed their fury on the enemy. They wanted time to knock out the enemy before the assault began. C Company with Vivek and Tomar were to attack at 2030 hours, along the south-east approach. D Company with Mohit was to attack first, at 2000 hours, along the south-western ridge. The staggered attack was a clever ploy to surprise the enemy. It was done to make them believe that the main attack was coming from the south-west so that they shifted their troops and heavy weapons to that side while the attack was actually coming from the south-east. The Bravo Company attack couldn't make headway and was stalled. However, C Company made good progress and, by 2230 hours, had secured Area Flat. Seeing the opportunity, Maj Vivek Gupta, along with the reserve platoon, attacked Tololing Top from the unexpected direction and captured it.

A dejected Robin, who was by now quite informal with Archie, complained to him, saying, 'Tau, what is this? We are damn reserves.'

'Oh, come on, Robin, everyone has a role to play. You never know how the old man will use us. We will get our chance to get the buggers during the exploitation [to take advantage of the break after the attack to launch the

reserves] to Hump,’ said his senior gently. That was the longest wait of Robin’s life. Lying on his back with his backpack under his head as a pillow, he gazed at the clear night sky with the stars twinkling brightly. ‘So beautiful,’ he thought, shutting out the ruthless shelling that was going on just a kilometre and a half away. Off and on, his mind went back to his home in Noida or to Naina in Jammu.

Battles seldom go as planned. The enemy fell for the ruse. Convinced that the main attack was happening in the south-west, they hurriedly shifted men and guns from the Top and Area Flat to reinforce that position. This was a fatal mistake. By 0030 hours, C Company had captured Tololing Top and Area Flat.

Unfortunately, the happiness was short-lived, as Maj Vivek Gupta fell during the battle. Suddenly, there was a deafening explosion, as a medium artillery shell exploded close by, shaking everyone to the bone. Through the dim light, the shadowy figure of Tomar emerged, dusting himself off. It was a close shave.

The enemy had shifted the men from Tololing Top to the south-western approach, from where they feared the attack was coming. Thus, the enemy was able to withhold the attack of B Company. Hav Sultan Singh had been killed while running to destroy the enemy universal machine gun (UMG) bunker. A dangerous situation had developed. While Tololing Top had been captured and the western edge secured, a gap in the middle was still left. This was not acceptable as the enemy could use it to counter-attack. Just then, the radio set crackled and it was ‘One Five’ (the commanding officer). Robin could not hear what was being said, but his instincts said it was a call to arms. With a sparkle in his eyes, Robin, like a schoolboy, asked Archie, ‘Tell me, Tau, what’s it, tell me!’ Archie turned to look at him and said, ‘Come on, you bum, we go for Barbad Bunker now. You will lead. I, along with company headquarters and No. 2 Platoon, will be 200 metres behind you. Good luck! Let’s screw them!’

Robin was already ready to leave. In fact, everyone was geared up. Robin did his last-minute checks, and with silent but meaningful pats on each other’s backs, they commenced their rendezvous with the enemy. They

slipped, fell and helped each other as they climbed till they could see the silhouette of a big bunker about 50 metres away. Their fatigue vanished. With a blood-curdling battle cry of '*Raja Ram Chander ki Jai*', they charged. With weapons held tightly, teeth clenched, face muscles taut and eyes narrowed, they moved in for the kill, firing when they reached closer. There was intense firing from the enemy too, but finally Barbad Bunker was stormed.

Just then, there was a light explosion followed by a scream. Rfn Dhruv Singh, who was just ahead of Rfn Mahesh, had stepped on a mine and his leg had been blown off. The leg was hanging from shreds of skin. Mahesh cut the skin with his bayonet.

After a brief fight, the enemy tried to escape. The troops had not noticed a trench where two soldiers had been firing from. They charged in the dark and shouted, 'Up with your hands.' The Pakistani soldiers hesitated, and there was a volley of bullets from different directions that killed them. Finally, the enemy abandoned Tololing, or Azam Post, as they called it, and scooted. They somehow escaped the ambush laid by Capt Rautela and his *ghataks* (commandos) between Hump and Tololing.

As Robin's platoon was reorganizing, Archie and the rest of the company joined them. It was over quickly but shelling continued and the Indian soldiers sought shelter in the trenches and bunkers made by the Pakistanis. Finally, the commanding officer spoke to the commander on the radio and said, 'Sir, I am on top of Tololing.' However, Sub Bhanwar Lal, who had confidently declared before the attack that they would have their morning cup of tea on top of Tololing, lay dead.

It turned bitterly cold in the wee hours. Robin and his company commander entered the Pakistani ration-store bunker and found canned fruit and condensed milk. They kept themselves warm by burning butter tins and enjoying the canned ration. At the break of dawn, Robin and Archie sat on a bunker airing their feet, with captured enemy weapons. The bodies of the slain enemy soldiers lay nearby.

There were stories of Pakistani soldiers being shot while trying to escape or attempting to lob a grenade. There was a general sense of relief and

happiness that it was all over. But the loss of their comrades soured the victory.

The news of the victory at Tololing electrified the nation. In the morning, the commanding officer came around to check and said, 'Robin, well done!' An excited Robin fished out a chocolate from his pocket and offered it to his commanding officer. 'Thank you, my boy!' he said with a smile and left.

By now, their casualties had been evacuated to the Regimental Aid Post some distance away. The bodies of the dead Pakistani soldiers had also been shifted. A few days later, Robin excitedly called his mother from a VSAT telephone to inform her of the victory and tell her the details. 'Our officer, Vivek, fought bravely, Mama. He will definitely get a Param Vir Chakra. You must save the newspapers of 12, 13 and 14 June. I will read them once I am back,' said Robin. Tripta's heartbeat quickened and she said a silent prayer under her breath.

The press was milling around as the unit went down to Drass. But Robin and some others were tasked to collect trophies for photographs with the BBC. Robin was not too happy about it. Coincidentally, Atal Bihari Vajpayee also chose to visit the area on the same day. He was kept out of the danger area, but Gen Malik, who was the chief of army staff, landed in the battalion and gave a big 'shabashi', and to everybody's delight a bottle of Scotch! After all, it was the turning point of the war. 2 Raj Rif had become a household name. There was praise all around, and Robin was happy. In his heart of hearts, he still hoped to get some recognition soon.

A few days later, Robin's father wrote a demi-official letter to the commanding officer congratulating the unit for its sterling victory and expressing his sympathies for those who had lost their lives. While saluting Vivek, he wrote, 'The brave will fall in battle and they will inspire generations of Indians to come.' The commanding officer expressed his gratitude in return.

Meanwhile, even though Robin was busy, he thought of roughly sketching the battle scene in his diary before the important details were forgotten. The sketch he scrawled showed Tololing, the directions of the attack, stars to mark Maj Vivek Gupta and Maj Adhikari, indicating the

place where they had fallen. He was still working when he was called by the second-in-command. Thus the sketch remained incomplete in his diary. The fatigue, apprehension and rigour were over for now. The unit gave a military farewell to Maj Gupta and his nine companions who had fallen in the battle. At the wreath-laying ceremony, everyone maintained decorum, but once they stood back in line, not one eye was dry. Robin wondered about the frailty of life. A few hours ago they had all been there, ready and gung-ho, and now one of them had left them all forever.



CHAPTER 18

Knoll—a Fight to the Finish

The battle had been won but at a cost—the lives of their brothers. It was time for the unit to rest, recoup and get ready for the tasks that lay ahead. They congregated at Matayan. It is important for officers and jawans to be able to gather themselves physically and mentally before getting into another task. Often, they do not have the luxury of time, so any break is more than welcome.

It was the same for Robin. Being emotional by nature, the loss of his brother officer hit him hard. He remembered how he had learnt of his senior's martyrdom in the North-east, back in the academy. How difficult it had seemed to go on with life as though nothing had happened. Choosing not to discuss it with anyone else, he had written to his father. His father had then explained the reality of being an army officer. Death was going to come to everyone in some way or the other, but getting it while serving the nation was the most glorious of them all. Robin had never imagined that he would see it at such close quarters, so soon. Now that he had, he remembered his father's words. He gave a silent salute to his most loved Vivek Gupta Sir, who had made the ultimate sacrifice, and decided to move on to complete the job he had started.

Robin had to stay back with some troops at Tololing Top, as 13 Jak Rif, with its commanding officer, Lt Col Y.K. Joshi, was to pass through for the next phase. However, he was not able to meet Robin due to the ongoing operations and because the sun was setting. Moreover, the battlefield had to be cleared. They had to evacuate their dead and collect the bodies of the Pakistani soldiers lying around scattered, along with the captured weapons.

Equipment and ammunition had to be removed too. Hav Mahesh was with Robin when he received the orders to bring down some trophies for a photograph. Thankfully, it was all over, or at least that's what they thought. For the time being, Robin just wanted to sleep.

At the young age of twenty-two, Robin had seen death, mutilation and pain at close quarters. Lying in his bunker, he replayed the battle in his mind. He had seen comrades covered in blood, left behind, while the rest furiously charged ahead. The sound of gravel and pebbles that made them skid as they charged with a blood-curdling battle cry mixed with the shrieks of the wounded echoed in his ears. It was slowly coming back to him—the nerve-shattering explosions of shells, the flashes of orange grenades bursting with black smoke, showering splinters all over, the endless rattling of machine guns. He recalled the faces of his battered comrades, helplessness writ large on them, their eyes seeking help; of brave men patiently waiting for someone to come and help them. He remembered the dead bodies of the Pakistani soldiers, their faces ashen, their eyes blank. They were just like them. Intrusive thoughts crossed his mind as he tossed on his camp cot. It is difficult for anyone to understand the experience, feelings and emotions a soldier goes through on the battlefield. The fear he experiences of losing his life or limbs, or his colleagues, like Vivek Gupta Sir or Sultan Singh. His young mind circled back to thinking about fear, courage, pain and even death.

Maj Sandeep Kala, whom the officers had met in Delhi, had joined the battalion. The first attack was over. The unit had suffered the loss of some of its bravest men. The major would often take a walk around the camp, interacting with the young officers and jawans to get a sense of their morale. Every once in a while, when they would get fresh fruits and milkmaid in their ration, he would be enthusiastically invited by Robin and Archie along with the others to join in to feast on their favourite pudding. The youngsters would concoct their own version of fruit cream by mixing condensed milk with fresh fruits, which they relished to their heart's content. He would look at these boisterous boys laughing and smiling, trying to derive pleasure from these little things, even though their hearts

were heavy with the loss of their comrades and the uncertainty of their own lives. ‘What are they made of?’ he would often ask himself. As they would make funny faces and pose with props for the camera, the major would smile and silently pray to God to be with them in the battles ahead. Their lives had just begun. Someone had a child on the way, another had a loved one waiting for him to come back and ask for her hand in marriage. Their stories were different but each one of them deserved to live, to go back and reunite with their families, look after them and live the future of his dreams. 2 Raj Rif was blessed with some valiant men, and the senior officers couldn’t be more thankful for the team.

A few days after the attack, a well-known journalist named Ramesh Vinayak of *India Today* entered the tent of the heroes who had just returned from the Tololing battle. He was welcomed by the groggy-eyed and battle-fatigued Maj Acharya, Capt Kenguruse and Robin, who gave him a blow-by-blow and graphic account of the battle along with a peg of rum. There were other journalists too, like Gaurav Sawant and Vikram Jeet Singh, who met Robin. Meeting Gaurav was very special as they both lived in Sector 29 of Noida. It was an odd but unforgettable place for a rendezvous.

Robin would try to think of different things when the going got too tough. Perhaps he could now ask for the leave he needed to be able to attend his cousin’s wedding in the end of June. He knew his family and all his cousins would be waiting for him. Though things had been heating up in the Valley for a while, his family, except his parents, especially his sibling and cousins, had just started realizing the seriousness of the situation. Thus, everyone hoped to see him at the wedding, but he could not make it. During the wedding party, held at the Golf Course in Dhaula Kuan, Tripta spoke to him, describing all that was going on and how they missed him. She also gave him the happy news that Birdie had got admission in the Regional College of Engineering in Lucknow. He was most pleased.

Robin also wanted to tell his parents about Naina, but wanted to do so in person. Though, in order to test the waters, he did write letters with some cleverly hidden hints. One time, when his father expressed concern about his safety in a letter, Robin replied, ‘*Mere paas pyaar ki taaqat hai* [I have

the strength of love].’ On the other hand, Naina was sick with worry and lived from one call/letter to the next.

Robin concluded that emotions such as fear, fatigue and thoughts of his loved ones, which were weakening his resolve, could be overcome by powerful sentiments of patriotism, self-esteem, military code and family traditions. Most importantly, he thought of the soldiers he was leading, and that drove him. He felt he had to come out of this victorious, after the victory at Barbad Bunker.

The sense of honour, duty and the apparent fearlessness of his colleagues kept him going. Moreover, he had the *izzat* (honour) of the paltan to uphold. He realized that fear manifested in varying degrees in some form or the other and had to be won over. In fact, he also realized that other than the fear of life and limb, of colleagues and of honour, there was another fear—the fear of being afraid. His unshakable faith in God also saw him through. He reposed his faith in Karni Mata, praying to her to protect him. He thought of the relief on every face when they would eventually come out victorious and alive. He often thought that after returning home, he would try to speak to someone about his feelings, but he doubted anyone who had not been through a battle would fully understand him, except his father. Such thoughts would consume him on most nights till sleep would take over.

On 24 June 1999, as the sun rose on a new day, orders arrived that 2 Raj Rif had to plan another attack to capture Knoll. Robin was to lead. There was no time to think or contemplate—his mind was now fully occupied with the next attack. He called his mother and told her to not expect any call from him for the next twenty days or so because they were going for another task. Neither was she told, nor did she fathom that this new task was to be another attack.

The preparations started with reconnaissance, study of the ground, planning of timings, etc. What he saw through his binoculars was unnerving. Knoll was menacing, ugly. The area looked like a bowl, with them at the base and the enemy at the circumference. It was just a rock face that shone like a sheet of metal. There was not even a blade of grass to take

cover in. Luckily, they had captured a night-vision device during the attack on Tololing. That came in handy. His friend, Maj Mohit Saxena, and he would take turns. While Mohit would stand guard, Robin would try and get closer to the enemy. As soon as the Pakistanis would move around, Mohit would warn him on the radio, 'Watch out! They are coming behind the rock.' Robin would then quickly melt away. Sometimes he would go closer and, through his binoculars, see men around the bunkers. Some were in khakis and some in black and blue tracksuits. He also identified three *sangars* (bunkers made of loose boulders). He clearly saw a barbed wire and also what looked like antennas.

Robin had to lead the attack and make sure his men reached these guys. Back at the base, they paid a visit to the makeshift temple of Karni Mata and sought strength, success and protection. Again, he thought of the attack. It was an exceptionally difficult feat to achieve at night. Its slopes had a gradient of almost 80 degrees and the gullies going up were full of loose boulders and gravel. There was just one narrow ridge leading to Knoll with deep, almost vertical, precipitous valleys on both sides, as though sliced with a knife.

Once again, anxiety and tension started creeping in at the thought of the impending attack. Robin told the artillery officer, Maj Ashok Sharma, 'Sir, you fire on the objective so accurately and heavily that the enemy abandons this position. It is a very difficult feature to attack. See those bloody slopes. We can get to the top only if you punish Knoll so severely that the enemy just runs away before the attack.' Sharma assured him by saying, 'Don't you worry, Robin, I will make them suffer more than you can imagine. The fire of more than a hundred guns in that small area will leave Knoll unrecognizable.'

Robin was restless that night. Even in the flurry of activity—so many men around, his colleagues, Pakistani shelling—he felt strangely alone and his thoughts drifted to faraway Noida. He longed for the security of his home and the comfort of his room. How he missed his family. He wanted to embrace his mother more than anything else and hold his father's hand. But here he was, all by himself, with his platoon of men he had to lead.

A day before the attack, he got his men together near a clump of trees and gave them a pep talk. Earlier that day, a soldier was carrying the framed image of their beloved Karni Mata from one place to another, possibly for cleaning, when it fell from his hands and broke, making the soldiers anxious.

‘Listen to me, all of you. The day has come when we have to pay back the price of the country’s namak (salt of the nation stands for loyalty, fidelity, duty), when we have to prove ourselves. Our paltan has never failed in a task. Don’t think of anything other than Knoll. We are Rajputs and today we have to prove what that means. I will lead you. If I turn back, shoot me, and I shall shoot anyone who turns back. Tonight, we have to avenge the death of Gupta Sir and our comrades,’ he said. Sub Man Singh added, ‘Don’t worry too much about the revenge, just get to Knoll. Are you ready?’ There was a resounding ‘Yes!’ The men were charged up and they let out their battle cry, ‘*Raja Ram Chander ki Jai!*’

Robin, Archie and Alpha Company silently slipped into their forward assembly area. Leading the attack was Hav Kishan, Rfn Mahesh, Rfn Satish and Rfn Kanwar Pal. By the evening of 27 June, they had assembled behind the Jain post, which was about a kilometre from Knoll. Here they had to wait for D-Day and the H-Hour (the right time for attack).

‘Robin,’ Archie said solemnly. ‘Listen, boy, the bullet never spares anyone, so don’t be rash, don’t take any *punga* [unnecessary risk].’

‘Don’t you worry, Sir, the bullet with my name written on it has not been made yet,’ replied Robin confidently, and added, ‘Sir, you please take care. You are going to be a father soon!’ They had a hearty laugh, and that was perhaps required to hide their apprehensions.

The company quartermaster havildar (CQMH), Sumer Singh, of HQ Company was in charge of logistics, sending supplies, ammunition and the evacuation of casualties. He had got packets of shakarparas (a sweet Indian snack) and fried lentils, and distributed them to the soldiers. That evening, Robin rang up Hav Harjit Singh, who was sending them hot food from the langar (cookhouse).

‘What is for dinner?’ he asked.

‘Sir, there are hot puris, aloo mattar and halwa [fried bread, pea-and-potato curry and a sweet dish],’ replied Harjit.

‘Please send it quickly, so we can enjoy a good meal before we go,’ Robin requested.

Harjit, however, said that though dinner was ready, there was no respite from the accursed artillery fire. ‘As soon as we get a break, we will send it up,’ he promised. But they never got a break and the food never came. They finally ate Maggi cooked on a field compo ration stove. Sitting at that height, with the setting sun in the background and chilly winds howling, a bowl of steaming noodles seemed like the best meal they had ever had. As Maj Bajaj said, ‘At this height and weather, nothing tastes better than a bowl of Maggi.’

On 28 June, at dusk, as shells burst along the ridgeline far away, they started moving towards their ‘release point’ ahead of the fire base, which, for some strange reason, was named ‘Kajal’ (Kohl), just like Archie’s pet retriever. At 1930 hours, a strange silence descended on the area. The atmosphere was taut. As Bajaj, Archie, Mohit, Robin, Kenguruse and Rautela sat in wait, their heartbeats quickened. Courage is often mistaken as lack of fear. However, true courage is overcoming one’s fear and moving forward. Hence, the officers made sure to not let the fear take over and cracked jokes, pulled each other’s legs and even discussed their leave plans to lighten the mood. A day ago, at the base, some of them had decided to write letters to their families back home.

As Robin had sat with a sheet of paper and pen, thinking what to write, he could clearly hear his mother fussing around in the kitchen, his father walking in through the front door in his uniform, smiling and saying, ‘Don’t worry, Robin, you go ahead.’ He shook himself out of his reverie. He thought of everything he wanted to say, since he had only one sheet. He decided to leave his parents with instructions on what to do after him, which included looking after Ruksana, meeting Naina and donating his organs. He calmly put pen to paper and wrote his last letter. He finished it with a clear message that he wanted them to ‘LIVE LIFE KING-SIZE!’.

A little later, he met Tomar and handed him the letter, saying, 'Do me a favour. In case I don't come back, please give this to my parents.' He then fished out a packet from his pocket and said, 'This is for her.'

'Oh, come on, Robin, don't talk crap,' said Tomar, slapping his back.

'Fine. But promise, you will hand it over,' Robin insisted.

'Okay, okay, I will, I will. But you'll see, you will take it back from me after you return. Don't get senti, yaar,' Tomar said, gently stroking his shoulder.

'I sure hope so, buddy,' Robin said with a sigh.

Later, as they all sat together waiting in position at Kajal, an eerie silence enveloped them. Suddenly, it was shattered as the artillery opened fire. Among them was 315 Field Regiment with Maj C.B. Dwivedi as the gun position officer, who wanted every shell to be effective. But despite being very accurate and the heavy firing, the enemy managed to get away. There were caves and crevices on the reverse side of Knoll, to which the enemy soldiers fell back for shelter. There were Bofors guns, rockets, mortars and machine guns spitting fire, all targeted at Knoll. The battery commander, Maj Ashok Sharma, fell and sustained an injury on his back and had to be evacuated. The other artillery officer, Capt Akhilesh Saxena, also sustained a splinter injury and had to be evacuated.

With so many men just a kilometre from Knoll, the enemy realized that the attack was imminent. They had registered their targets. Pakistani guns opened up in response. Robin saw the time on his sturdy G-Shock, it was 1930 hours. He gave the signal to advance and the platoon quietly moved to its predesignated release point. The moon had not risen yet, and it was still dark. Just then, the one thing they had dreaded happened. A salvo landed on Robin's platoon. They were pinned down just as they were getting into their attack formation. There were shrieks and shouts as men were hit—some killed and some wounded. Among those killed was his very dear sahayak, Rfn Jagmal Singh. Robin was stunned as he stared at the dust-covered body of Jagmal with blood flowing down his face. He shook him repeatedly, saying, 'Jagmal, Jagmal.' But his friend had become still, his head hanging limp to one side. He was gone.

A heartbroken Robin sat there as though in a trance, staring at him. The next salvo and screams of the wounded brought him back. Men ran helter-skelter, seeking cover behind rocks. NCOs shouted to restore order, section commanders yelled to get their sections together while the groans of the wounded continued. Shells were bursting all around, raining hot metal on the platoon; others were flying over their heads with a whistling sound. Covered in sweat, smoke and dust, Robin stood up and shouted for the men to get together.

First, he got the wounded men behind the cover of an outcrop. Then, managing to gather nineteen of his men, he went down the slope for cover into Tololing Nulla (stream) with the enemy artillery trailing him. The commanding officer had witnessed Robin's platoon being badly mauled. In fact, he wrote off his platoon, No. 3 Platoon, from playing any further role in the battle. He then launched No. 2 Platoon with Archie. With the enemy fire still directed towards Robin's platoon, Archie seized the opportunity and rushed straight ahead to attack Knoll. There was a fierce exchange of fire.

Out of nowhere and most unfortunately, a grenade landed right in front of Archie, his chest taking most of the impact. Robin's beloved Tau, to the shock and dismay of all surrounding him, breathed his last. He had promised his wife a gold necklace if she gave birth to a girl child. At this moment, she sat thousands of kilometres away, oblivious that her husband had broken the last promise he had made to her. The unforgiving hands of destiny had broken a family even before it was complete.

On the other hand, unaware of this devastating news, Robin was determined to capture Knoll with his company at all costs. He almost ran to be in time for the last assault and was out of breath. He did not want to be left out. He led the group of men towards Knoll by looking at the flashes from the enemy rifles and UMGs, and their own machine-gun tracers hitting Knoll from Kajal. During the charge, his senior JCO, Sub Man Singh, was badly wounded when an artillery shell splinter hit him.

The commanding officer was pleasantly surprised when he got the message that Robin's party had rejoined the company. He was relieved. By

now, the battleground was bathed in moonlight. This made the monstrous slopes of Knoll with bunkers and sangars clearly visible. There were bright orange and gold balls of fire everywhere, with black smoke engulfing the flashes. The 'beautiful' pearly lines of tracers marked their deadly path across the hills. There were brilliant flashes of white as 155 mm shells burst in the sky, raining red-hot metal shrapnel, which felt like sharp knives on human flesh as they swished through the air. There was rifle fire as well, which was aimed to kill. The enemy was at such a position of advantage that even a rock tossed by them worked like a weapon.

Artillery fire is more benign as it is not aimed at anyone in particular, but it can harm someone unintended, kilometres away. By this time, all the men were tired, bruised, exhausted and thirsty. Many of them carried balls of snow in their pockets to melt and drink if necessary. Thus the 'other side' wasn't their only enemy. The surroundings were merciless too.

There were bone-rattling explosions and blinding flashes as shells and rockets burst all around. Enthusiastically and fearlessly, Robin moved with his men and joined the platoon that had been led by Archie before he got killed. Tired and out of breath, he asked the first soldiers he met, 'Where is the company commander?' He didn't get a reply. The men had been told to not disclose the news of Archie's demise to Robin, knowing that he would explode with anger. However, on persistent inquiry, one soldier said hurriedly, 'Sahib, the company commander is no more.'

All went numb for a moment. It was as though a rock had struck him. Robin's heart burst with unimaginable pain and anger. Sub Shivnayak could see that he was beside himself with pain. The true and ugly face of war had been revealed. For all its glorification, it was, in fact, a gruesome business of killing. For a few minutes, he sat there, shocked, silent tears streaming down his face. His senior JCO, Man Singh, had been hit by a shell splinter in his back and was lying face down, motionless. Just then, he noticed that the LMG was being manned by one rifleman, whereas there should have been two. Looking up at his men questioningly, he asked 'Where is Annand?'

'Sir, he has been killed as well,' they replied.

Shocked and livid, Robin picked up the LMG and yelled at his men to follow him. With a loud battle cry of '*Raja Ram Chander ki Jai*', they charged ahead, clearing the last bunker. He reached the edge of Knoll, beyond which there was a narrow neck joining it to Three Pimples. Everything was clearly visible in the bright moonlight. There was the enemy, three positions active at Three Pimples. The enemy was firing UMGs with a vengeance. Artillery shells were exploding all over. The area had an overpowering smell of gunpowder. Beyond this point, the ridge narrowed down into sharp vertical cliffs on both sides. Only one or two soldiers could move forward at a time. Robin and his NCO, Tilak Singh, advanced precariously, with Sub Shivnayak on the right.

He was made to speak to the commanding officer on his radio set. 'Robin,' he said, 'listen, we are behind the enemy now, they can't get away. Just fall back 50 metres below the crest and we will sort it out in the morning.'

Robin replied, 'Sir, we have lost so many men to get this. If I fall back, they will reoccupy it and we will have to lose those many more men again. I am sorry, Sir, I cannot go back now.'

With that, they took cover behind a boulder and started engaging the enemy position, just 25 metres away and on slightly higher ground. They were so close that the enemy could easily lob grenades at them with precision. In his enthusiasm, Robin lifted his head to fire at the enemy more than once. Hav Dhan Singh kept pressing his head down, repeatedly asking him to stay low. The rock face behind which they had taken cover was being pelted with bullets. But Robin was unconcerned as his mind was focused on the bunker right ahead. They could faintly see the enemy firing and hear them clearly. A volley of abuse accompanied the fire. They yelled, '*Bhag jao, Kaffiron, tum kya ladoge* [Run away, you Kaffirs, what will you fight]?' Drawing the response, '*Ruk jao, saalon, tumhara to bhagne ka time nikal chuka, ab janaza hi niklega* [Wait, you bastards, the time for you to run away has passed. Now only your funeral will leave from here].'

Robin's face would be lit up in the flashes of airbursts. Then there was a brief lull. He decided to charge at the enemy bunker. He had hardly leapt

forward when a second machine gun at the back opened fire and Robin was hit straight in the head. He fell in the arms of Tilak Singh. A little later, though he would never know, his pal, Kenguruse, also fell 500 metres away at Lone Hill in another brilliant act of gallantry. Angered by the loss of Robin, Shivnayak gathered his men and assaulted the enemy, who took flight. Knoll and Three Pimples were fully cleared by 9 a.m. on 29 June. But the battle was long over for Robin.

In an instant, he was gone. In the highest tradition of the Indian Army, he had avenged the death of his brothers in arms and immersed himself in his dreams forever. He would never have to hang up his beloved uniform now . . . Truly, *Veer Bhogye Vasundhara . . . The brave had indeed inherited the earth!*



Robin showing off his muscles at his house in Barrackpore



Robin's first day of school at Tara Hall, Shimla



Robin handling his baby brother Birdie with care, at Mhow



The brothers together in Manali



The fighter pilot's cockpit that Robin recreated in his room



Trypta and the boys on their way to school in Pathankot



From left to right: Virender, Birdie, Trypta, Mamaji, Robin and Kartoos, together in Meerut



Robin, with his friend Jay Deep, flexing his muscles at a gym in Noida



The moment Robin made Tonny laugh at her *bidai* after her wedding in Chandigarh



Robin posing with the tank he saw on his trip to Jhansi



Sweetie Bua and Robin at the Jhansi Fort. He gave her his sunglasses because the sun was too strong.



Robin during his time as a cadet at the IMA



The commandant of the IMA awarding Robin the gold medal for water polo



Ready for the parajump in Agra



For his 'on-the-job' training after the IMA, Robin was sent to Naushera



Last family photo in Noida, 26 December 1998



Robin and Archie were inseparable. A photo of them in a lighter moment.



Robin, Archie and Vivek in a photo taken by Kenguruse. None of them returned home from the war.



The captured weapons at the Barbad Bunker



Before the attack on Tololing



Knoll, where Robin fought his last battle



Robin with his rifle



Robin's grandmother receiving the Vir Chakra from President K.R. Narayanan



Vice President B.S. Shekhawat presenting an award to Tripta and Virender in Robin's honour



Thousands joined Robin's funeral procession in Noida to honour their hero



Virender with his three sisters at Robin's last rites



Birdie, Roli and Virender at the Tololing War Memorial



Tripta with Ruksana



At Vijyant Helipad with Lt Gen K.T. Parnaik. It was named after Robin in his honour.



Vijyant Mandir in Knoll



Vijyant Memorial at Arki (Solan) in Himachal Pradesh



The sight of Tololing from an old war memorial



Virender visits Knoll every year on the day of Robin's martyrdom, as Robin had wished in his last letter

Dearest: Momma Papa and Budde.

He knows my letter finds you
either reading or listening to the
gallant ^{story} of 2 boys & the capture
of Tololing

1. I am alive till now - Can't
say till next attack.
2. Life is tough.
3. We are getting battle honour
for it.
4. My home is missing.
5. I am at 16,000 feet.
6. Lost one eye he might
get P.V.C.
7. Love Robin:

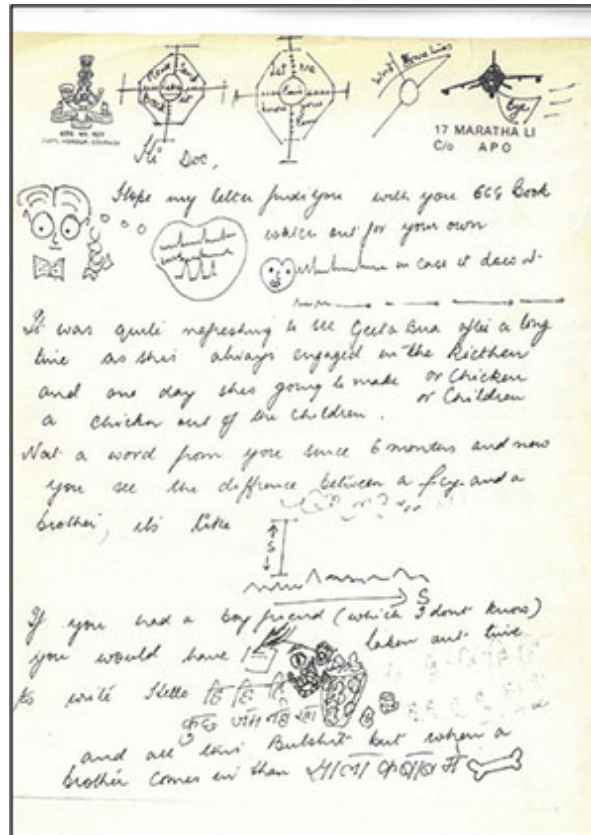
It's a frustrating place. Snow
all over my self on rocks,
dead bodies lying & be picked up.
get used

To shelling now. Preserve the newspapers
of 14, 15, 16, 17, 18. Love
Robin

The letter Robin sent after the battle of Tololing

Please hope.
 But I look for your
 new adventure
 today I can just say
 that about you disappointed say
 "60 is the old age of youth but
 is the youth of old age"
 do keep the faith high.
 I have 3 recommendations in Bikaner.
 { - 11 months - Virender
 { - 14 weeks - 45 years
 { - 73 hours - 100%
 if they bring into your good and then out.
 I know the time you must have enjoyed
 but I am very confident about you.
 I am in the beautiful forest camp living
 with a lot of scenic views and trying to
 understand the beauty of the world, my
 tomorrow I have 100% come to then.
 hope.
 MAY YOUR RETIREMENT
 BE THE BEGINNING
 OF NEW SATISFACTIONS,
 NEW FULFILLMENT
 AND NEW HAPPINESS!
 With love
 from Robin

The card Robin sent to Virender on his retirement



Some of the doodles Robin drew on one of his letters

The Aftermath

Life Is but a Dream!

1995, Noida

A young Robin, while on their run, said to Hemant, ‘You know, last night, I dreamt of Noida, but it seemed as if it was in the future. There were taller buildings, many cars, lots of people. Then I saw Dad, Mama, Birdie and even you. But, strangely, I didn’t see myself.’

‘Are you sure you saw me?’ asked Hemant, a bit taken aback.

‘Haan, Khalse, I did. Don’t worry. But it was strange,’ Robin replied.

‘Yaar, by the way, what if one of us were to die before the other? I will really miss you if I die before you or you before me. How will we meet?’ asked Hemant.

‘Don’t worry, Khalse. Haven’t I told you that my dada [grandfather] visits me in my dreams? I will visit you too, and you can do the same if you go before me,’ Robin said matter-of-factly.

‘Promise?’ asked Hemant.

‘Pukka, promise,’ said Robin confidently.

30 June 1999, 9 p.m. (IST), somewhere in Memphis, Tennessee

Robin was smiling at Hemant. They were sitting together in Noida. Hemant called out to his friend, ‘Robin’, but he continued to smile. Suddenly, Hemant woke up and realized he was dreaming. A few minutes later, the phone rang. He answered. It was his father, who said, ‘*Beta*, I have very bad news for you . . . ’

29 June, early morning, Knoll

A hero had fallen, a son had been lost, but Knoll had been won. Robin was covered with a sleeping bag. Capt Somnath Basu, the regimental medical officer, had set up the Regimental Aid Post near Kajal. Basu had a shrapnel wound on the leg but he had refused to be evacuated till he had attended to the last of the casualties. He dressed his wound, took a painkiller and carried on. It was exemplary devotion to duty. But today Robin, like the other dead, did not require his services. In the morning, he was evacuated on a makeshift stretcher.

This had been the toughest battle fought by the Indian Army. It cost 2 Raj Rif the life of three officers and eight ORs, while fifty-two others were wounded. The victory was not savoured that day. In fact, no fire was lit in the cookhouse. With so many killed and so many wounded, there was a grim realization that the cost of war was beyond computation.

Early that morning, Maj Bhanwar Rathore, the quartermaster of the unit, heard sounds of sobbing from the commanding officer's snow tent. He ventured in to see Lt Col Ravindranath crying with his head in his hands for the men he had lost, for the young fighter Vijyant, for Archie the sutradhar, for the beloved Kenguruse. He was a strict commander, but deep within, he was a kind man who loved his men like his kids. Rathore, who was elderly, put his arms around the commanding officer, consoled him and requested him to get a hold of himself as the unit needed him to be strong, to take care of them. He explained that such was the nature of the battlefield—it consumed men. It's only a good commander who feels so deeply for his men.

Dawn broke as usual, with the radiant golden glow of the sun lighting up the lush-green fields. The bushes of the wild yellow roses swayed in the light mountain breeze as they always did. The Drass River flowed with its musical rippling sound. But Robin, Archie and Kenguruse, along with many others, could not see or feel it. Robin and Archie had been inseparable, even in death. Despite its significance, the Battle of Knoll, Three Pimples and Lone Hill got somewhat lost as it was fought, unlike Tololing or Tiger Hill,

far from the media glare. This battle did not have the aura of being the ‘first victory of the Kargil war’ as Tololing or the rapturous end of the campaign as the ‘last victory at Tiger Hill’. Hence, this story of courage, determination and pride needs to be retold over and over again, for these are the actions that make the legends of the Indian Army so endearing.

Meanwhile, on the night of 28 June 1999, the families of the martyrs prepared for bed as they did every day, each unaware of the catastrophe that had already struck their lives. At daybreak, Tripta as usual got dressed and went to her school, Ryan International. She was oblivious that her lovely world was about to crash. News of Robin’s death had already reached the army headquarters. Virender was in Alwar. For no apparent reason, he had slept fitfully the previous night and had woken up feeling restless. In fact, while praying, he lit four agarbattis (incense sticks) instead of the normal two as he was feeling uncomfortable. Then he put on his uniform and proceeded to the court martial duties, where he was a prosecutor.

The telephone rang at House No. 89, Sector 29, Arun Vihar, at 9 a.m. and the woman on the other end said, ‘Is this Capt Vijyant Thapar’s residence?’

‘Yes,’ replied Birdie, ‘I am his brother.’

‘Is there any elder person in the house I can speak to?’ she asked.

‘Please tell me what it is, and I will convey it,’ Birdie said casually, for he wasn’t prepared for what was to come next.

‘I have some bad news for you. Your brother, Capt Vijyant Thapar, fell fighting the enemy last night. He was a very brave man.’ With that there was a click and the line disconnected. Birdie froze; he felt like a boulder had struck him. He could not understand what he had just heard. Not knowing what else to do, he called his mother at school and was informed that she was taking a class. He said impatiently, ‘Ask her to leave everything and come home immediately.’

She was immediately called. It was as though a bolt of lightning had struck her when she heard Birdie say, ‘Mama, Robin is no more; he has been killed at Kargil.’ Shocked, she sank into the sofa. Then suddenly she shrieked, making her colleagues rush to her side and give her some water.

They put her in a car and brought her home. She cried her heart out as her sweet son's face flashed in front of her eyes.

In the meantime, the news was conveyed to Virender in Alwar. 'Sir, there is a call from the AG's Branch,' Virender was told. His heart sank as he got a hunch that it was about Robin. He prayed to God to let the news be that his son had been wounded but was otherwise all right. However, the voice on the other end dashed all such hopes. He said, 'Sir, I regret to inform you that your son, Capt Vijyant Thapar, was killed last night fighting the enemy valiantly. We salute him.' He felt the earth move under his feet. The others rushed to his side. The news had reached the tea room and everybody knew of the tragedy. He was given water and his blood pressure and pulse were checked. Soon a car was arranged and a Sikh JCO of the regiment, who had experienced something similar, and two soldiers escorted Virender back to Noida. It was the longest journey of his life.

The district administration had received the news. A few people who had collected by then were to become a sea of human beings by the time the mortal remains of Robin arrived. Birdie and his mother were in a state of shock, exhausted and broken. The district magistrate, Manoj Singh, could foresee a huge gathering. Hence, the first thing he did was to cancel the Daler Mehndi show that had been organized on a massive scale at Noida Stadium. Then, along with his team, he got busy with the arrangements of Robin's last rites. He wanted the ceremony to be worthy of the young hero's sacrifice, the town's sentiments and his personal respect for the officer.

By the time Virender reached home, his devastated wife could hardly move. On seeing him, she felt another stab of pain. She broke down in his arms and silent tears streamed down her face, which was contorted in agony. They held each other. Their perfect family now stood broken, untimely.

A large number of people started pouring in: Lt Gen G.S. Sihota, Vir Chakra, GOC of 2 Corps; Virender's school friends; Maj Gen G.H. Israni, who had signed Robin's character certificate. Col J.K. Sengupta, who had been blinded when his tank was hit in the 1965 war, came all the way from Siliguri. The friends were meeting after twenty years on such a difficult

occasion. They gave him strength by saying, 'V.N., be proud, your son has brought glory to us. It's a great thing to be a father of a brave son.' By now the house was packed with people who had come to pay respects to a young warrior who had laid down his life for the honour of his country.

Sitting at end of the bed, incapable of crying any more, was his eighty-six-year-old grandmother, his beloved Mamaji, trying her best to cope with the loss of her grandson, whom she loved beyond measure. She sat looking blankly ahead, wringing her hands endlessly and muttering incoherent words.

At the same time, an Indian Airlines plane carrying Robin, along with many of his colleagues, in a plywood coffin, was on its way. His last journey had started from the field hospital at Drass with his brothers in arms. They were evacuated to 192 Base Hospital, Srinagar, where they were cleaned and prepared for their long journey to far-off places via Delhi. The doctor, who went about his business unhappily, covered Robin in a clean bed sheet, changed his dressing and put a plaster patch on his shattered eye. They were then put in plywood coffins and taken to the airport, loaded in the cargo hold and taken to Delhi. Young Rautela flew with the coffins. Just a few months ago, he had been in the company of the brave and boisterous trio of his immediate seniors. He had loved having someone to joke with. Barely three months later, he was accompanying two of them, lying peacefully in their boxes, to their final destination. The jokes were now over.

Parents and close relatives were asked to come to the cargo terminal of the Delhi airport, where the martyrs could be received by their beloved kin. After some time, a tractor with a long train of trolleys, the kind that fetch the luggage of passengers, made an appearance on the tarmac. But this time, the trolleys were bearing a coffin each. A gathering of a few officers saluted the martyrs and then, after waiting for the deputy prime minister, who was to preside but had not reached yet, the gathering was moved to the gun sheds of 213 Medium Regiment for a military ceremony. It was a heartbreaking sight. A long row of coffins wrapped in the national flag were laid on tables covered with white sheets. These rows stretched from one end

of the long shed to the other. Twenty-one tables in all. A placard reading Capt Vijyant Thapar, 2 Raj Rif, stared at the Thapar family.

Virender had a sudden impulse to tear open the lid and take Robin out. Robin's grandmother embraced the wooden coffin and kept kissing it as though loving her grandson. Tripta stood holding her head high, with joined hands to wish her son. But soon her brave front melted away and tears started flowing freely.

On the day Robin was born, Virender had welcomed him with a sharp salute. Little did he know then that he was destined to see him off in the same way. Thus, a proud father in full uniform and a chest full of medals gave him a crisp but heavy salute for the second and last time. By now it was late for any more ceremonies and it was decided that Robin would be kept at the base hospital for the night and have his last rites in a proper manner on 3 July in Noida. Finally, his comrades parted. Archie was sent to Hyderabad and Kenguruse to Nagaland.

Naina, who had also received a call from one of the officers, decided to visit the family, though they had never met before. Meeting at such a time was distressing and difficult, but she was the love of a brave martyr and knew that she couldn't let her emotions come in the way of her bidding him a fitting farewell. In deciding to do so, she also fulfilled his wish of meeting his family. When his bier was taken out, she knelt and cried inconsolably.

The days that followed saw an entire city, an entire nation, stand tall with pride and bow down in respect to the job its sons had done. The name of the young twenty-two-year-old, who had laid down his life ever so bravely in the service of his motherland, was on everybody's lips. *The Hindu* and other newspapers reported that over 1.5 lakh people came for the last rites of the young man they did not know but respected and wanted to pay obeisance to.

Perhaps Robin looked down and smiled, for in his death he had achieved what he had always dreamt of when he was alive.

Afterglow: A Father's Note

The telephone rang at our residence on 14 August 1999. 'Hello VNT, congratulations,' a happy voice announced on the other end. 'Robin has been awarded a Vir Chakra.'

'Oh, that's great, and thanks a lot for the news,' I said politely. I had an immediate sense of happiness and fulfilment as I looked excitedly at Tripta, who smiled on hearing the news, albeit sadly. In the next minute, the smile disappeared and her eyes welled up again. I got up and sat next to her, taking her hands in mine as we both sat in silence. This was the second time the family was being awarded a Vir Chakra. Robin's uncle of the famous 2nd Battalion, Rajput Regiment had been honoured with it after the 1971 war.

My thoughts went back to a couple of months ago. In the peaceful environment of the open countryside of Punjab, the soft, melodious sounds of bhajans (devotional songs) floated in the air as my brother and I neared Kartarpur Sahib Gurdwara. This was approximately at a distance of 20 kilometres from the famed Anandpur Sahib, where Guru Gobind Singh had fought the enemy. We had decided to immerse a part of Robin's ashes in the Satluj River. After the rituals at Haridwar, we went to Kartarpur Sahib. Robin was born in Nangal, on the banks of the Satluj, which he loved. It flowed nearby, almost skirting the Shivalik foothills. We visited the gurdwara and then proceeded to the middle of the river in a boat and immersed the remaining ashes in its cool, flowing waters. With that, the last mortal remains of Robin were consigned to the river.

On the way back, I was engulfed with a feeling of emptiness, a kind of hollowness and glumness. Earlier, on 5 July, my brother, Birdie and I had gone to Haridwar for the final rituals. We had no clue what awaited us. The

events that unfolded were astonishing. Outside Haridwar, a police Gypsy stopped and requested us to follow it, leading us to the Circuit House on top of a small hillock that provided a full view of the ghats below. The district magistrate, Aradhana Shukla, received us personally. She said that the town was keen to give this young brave warrior, who had sacrificed his life for them, a befitting farewell. A large crowd of elders, leaders and prominent citizens gathered around the Circuit House. We had not told anyone about this visit but such was the admiration for this young man's courageous act that the news of our visit had reached before us. Citizens gathered in large numbers to express their solidarity and gratitude. There were chants of 'Long live Capt Vijyant Thapar'.

The head priest wanted to honour this soldier by personally administering his last rituals. Birdie and I sat cross-legged on the holy pedestal as the priest eulogized the virtue of courage and putting the interest of the country before everything else. It was this sentiment that had brought the people out in such large numbers to show their solidarity with Vijyant. Conch shells were sounded as the ashes of our son were immersed in the holy waters. The crowds were shouting loudly in praise of the warriors. Finally, the priest made an entry in a special chronicle of the ghats, noting the details of Capt Vijyant's act of gallantry and his sacrifice, thus enshrining these details in the annals of history for decades. Looking skywards, I reflected, my little child had reached such heights by his actions that he had earned the admiration of his countrymen. Who said we had lost him? He now lived in their hearts.

In Noida, Gen Malik came over on 4 July. It is indeed a proud moment when the chief of army staff salutes a young captain in appreciation of a duty well performed. For us, life could never be the same again. Unknown to us, the spirited people of Noida had renamed the road in front of our house as Lt Vijyant Thapar Marg. It was ratified by the Noida authority and nice pedestals of granite soon replaced the boards used as road markers. Later, one of the main gates of the prestigious Noida Stadium was named Lt Vijyant Thapar Dwar.

Finally, Tripta and I were left to ourselves and we started making sense of our shattered life. We sought solace in the fact that Robin had not suffered any pain like many others, and had left the world in a split second without knowing what had happened. One moment he was alive and the next he was no more. We looked through his trunk containing his clothes, which still emanated a strong smell of Robin, but even that would fade soon. Rummaging through his belongings, we found Rs 300 in his purse and a few shakarparas in one of his shirt pockets. We gladly had one each, as though it was part of a meal with him. Every personal item, like an IMA thermos, his Ray-Ban goggles and his Titan watch, reminded us of our son. In one corner of the trunk, neatly packed in a satin cloth, was a copy of the Bhagavadgita and a copy of Philip Mason's *A Matter of Honour*, both given by me. And there was a big cardboard box of audio cassettes. Randomly, I took out one and played it. We were left dumbstruck as recorded on it were two beautiful songs he had sung himself. 'Neele Neele Ambar Par' (Under the Blue Sky) and 'Chalte Chalte Mere Ye Geet Yaad Rakhna' (As You Go Along, Remember My Songs). We loved listening to it again and again, to hear our son's voice as though it was coming from the very same room! It filled the house with his presence. The glaring reality facing us was that we had not only lost our loving son but also his future family and grandchildren, who would have been a support for us in our sunset years. It made us sullen. But that was the price of war, which someone had to pay.

We reasoned that we may have lost Robin physically but his spirit was very much alive. We would use what was left of Robin to motivate the youth of the country. The last letter that he wrote prior to the attack propelled us to this purpose. It was his precious 'treatise' that he left behind.

This letter is a powerful document, and was almost a testament of his values as a soldier and as an Indian. Our young son held such high values. Since this last message was so relevant for the youth, we posted it on the Internet. Gen Malik, the chief of army staff, was so moved by it that he forwarded this letter to the IMA and asked the authorities to put it up to

motivate young cadets. It was also put up in the Kargil Corner of the Officers Training Academy Museum in Chennai.

Here was a young man who did not regret losing his life but was dead set to join the army and fight for the country again in his second life. Though as a father I was choked after reading this letter, I was also deeply moved by the nobility of Robin's character and his evolved soul.

It was clear that I had to honour what my son wished me to do. Vijyant wanted me to visit the place where they had fought. He wanted me to know and appreciate that he had acquitted himself well. Hence, I made up my mind to go to Kargil.

Meanwhile, the investiture function was held in the Durbar Hall of the Rashtrapati Bhavan on 11 April 2000. We decided that Robin's grandmother would accept the award. Not only was she the eldest and my mother, she herself was an army wife, an army daughter-in-law, an army mother-in-law and an army sister-in-law. From the age of nineteen to eighty-six, she had been with the army one way or another. The atmosphere was sombre and there was pin-drop silence. Trumpets announced the arrival of the president. Names of the awardees were announced one by one. The next of kin, often young wives in deep agony, were escorted by an officer as the citations were read and the award given out. It was a heart-wrenching experience to face the young women with their eyes full of tears. Finally, Robin's name was announced and the silver-haired eighty-six-year-old graceful lady, Robin's grandmother, escorted by Col Ravindranath, walked up with a heavy heart but hopeful eyes and a crutch for support to receive the award. Setting aside the formal protocol, the president, K.R. Narayanan, descended from the dais, walked up to her and gave her the award. The audience broke out in rapturous applause and the domes of Durbar Hall reverberated with the echoes. Robin's dream of being given a bravery award had been achieved. We were sure that Robin had heard the clapping that had rent the air.

As Robin had desired, I go to Drass and Knoll every year. It is my place of pilgrimage. Since 2016, I have not been able to go to the top but I go up to Pimple Adm Base just below Point 5140. Thousands of visitors visit the

Kargil War Memorial and learn about the deeds of Vijyant. On my journeys to Drass and Kupwara, I always think about these soldiers—what were they made of, where did they come from, the fire in them and the all-consuming love for their country? They must have been possessed by some divine spirit to do what they did.

Finally, the recognition from the enemy, whom he died fighting, was the ultimate compliment for ‘Vijyant the soldier’. The *Pakistan Times* on 3 July 1999 carried a picture of the last rites ceremony of Vijyant held in Noida. In fact, some young officers of the Pakistan Army left comments in his praise on his website.

After my visit, as I leave, my head involuntarily turns towards Knoll. Far away in the clouds and just below the snowline, a white dot shines in the rays of the rising sun. That is the Vijyant Mandir. It was built over the years by the various battalions located there. Even Birdie and his wife, Roli, accompanied me on my pilgrimage in 2010.

The other part of Robin’s wish was that I meet Ruksana and give her Rs 50 per month for her school fees. She lives in a remote area of Kupwara, where I would initially send financial help through the local commanders. After 2004, I go to meet her every year and look after her financial needs. One day, one of the leading TV channels surprised us when they asked us to come for a show in Delhi, where Ruksana made a stunning appearance. They had fetched her from Kupwara. She stayed in Noida for a day.

The nation was moved by the courageous young men in the war and expressed gratitude in their own ways. Some wrote songs, others staged plays and others painted. The famous playwright Aamir Raza Husain and his wife, Virat, directed an acclaimed play, *50 Day War: The Story of Kargil*, in which they dealt with the scene of Robin writing the last letter with extraordinary sensitivity, leaving the crowds in tears. The CEO and MD of Sahara Entertainment, Sushanto Roy, was so moved by the stories of the young men that he launched *Mission Fateh*. He himself played the role of Robin in this mega serial. One day, Tripta got a call from J.P. Dutta of *Border* fame. He was left aghast when Tripta replied that she had been expecting his call for a long time, adding, ‘But for your movie, *Border*, my

son would have been alive. He always wanted to be a real-life Capt Dharamveer.’

There have been many touching tributes to Robin. The most telling came on 12 June 2000, exactly a year after Tololing, when one of the officers of 2 Raj Rif, Maj Naresh Kaushik, and his wife, Vaishali, decided to name their newborn son Vijyant—Vijyant Kaushik. We as his parents now know that Robin will live through Vijyant Kaushik. Many young ‘mothers-to-be’ often speak about naming their newborn child after Robin. Such honours come only to ‘the brave’ who give up their life on the battlefield so that the next generation can emulate their actions. Just as Arun Khetarpal was Vijyant’s inspiration, Vijyant is the inspiration for others, and so the legacy of valiant Indian soldiers continues.

This is why they don’t die, but live on, forever, among us.

The following are a few important letters, including the famous last letter that Robin wrote before the battle at Knoll. The letters have been produced verbatim, without any changes in style or spellings, so they can be read as they were written.

Robin's Last Letter

Dearest Papa Mama Birdie and Granny,

1. By the time you get this letter I'll be observing you all from the sky enjoying the hospitality of Apsaras.
2. I have no regrets; in fact even if I become a human again I'll join the army again and fight for my nation.
3. If you can, please come and see where the Indian army fought for your tomorrow.
4. As far as the unit is concerned the new chaps should be told about this sacrifice. I hope my photo will be kept in the 'A' coy mandir with Karni Mata.
5. Whatever organ can be take, should be done.
6. Contribute some money to orphanage and keep on giving 50/- Rs to Ruksana per month and meet Yogi Baba.
7. Best of luck to Birdie, never forget this sacrifice of these men. Papa you should feel proud. Mama so should you, meet ____ [name distorted for privacy] (I loved her). Mamaji forgive me for everything wrong I did.

Ok then its time for me to join my clan of the Dirty Dozen. My aslt [assault] party has 12 chaps.

Best of luck to you all.

Live life king size.

Yours

Robin

Letters from Gen V.P. Malik

We are proud of Vijayant who along with his colleagues of 2 Raj Rif captured an important feature in Dras Sector. His was a brave action and in that he gave his life to the Army and the nation.

We share our grief with his parents.

India will always remember soldiers and young leaders like Vijayant Thapar.

Gen. V P Malik

4 July 1999

Dear Col Thapar,

03 Aug 99

Thank you for your letter of 28 Jul 99, and allowing us to use Vijayant's last letter for motivation of IMA cadets and officers. I am sending this to Commdt, IMA. This letter has tremendous inspirational value for the Army in particular and youth of the country in general.

As a soldier, and father myself, I once again salute you and your family for bringing up a son like Vijayant!

With regards,
Yours sincerely
V P Malik

Letter from Col M.B. Ravindranath

18 Aug 99

Dear Mrs Thapar

1. I am in receipt of the choclets and the card sent by you for me. I wish to thank you immensely for the wonderful gesture.
2. We are all proud the valour and determination of Robin has been recognised by the army and we are indeed indebted to you for having given us such a valiant son. I am sure his candor, cool courage and equinamity in face of most dangerous sit [situations] will inspire many generations. His martyrdom can be summed up in this quote

“To every man upon earth death must commeth sooner or later
How can a man die better than facing fearful odds
For the ashes of his fathers
And the temple of his Gods.”

With warm regards

Yours

Rav

A Note by Lt Gen Mohinder Puri

The war in Kargil was fought in the world's most rugged and inhospitable terrain, in sub-zero temperatures and with limited resources. But these shortcomings were more than made up by the courage, bravery, determination and heroism of our young officers and men. The tales of their valour and sacrifice have become a part of our folklore, which I hope the future generations will hear and emulate with pride. I had the privilege and honour to command the famous 8 Mountain Division, which spearheaded the country's counteroffensive against Pakistan's perfidy in the Kargil Sector in Jun–Jul 1999. I also had the honour to have battalions and regiments who left an indelible mark in military history. Lt Vijyant Thapar, Robin to his friends, was in 2 Rajputana Rifles, deployed in a counter-insurgency role in north Kashmir. I have a vague memory of Robin during the unit's stint in the Valley, but I do fondly remember him in the events which unfolded after the induction of the battalion to Matayan for the war in Kargil.

Tololing feature was the deepest incursion by Pak troops. The priority to capture the feature which had defied 18 Grenadiers for over three weeks was thus a necessity. I gave the task to capture Tololing to 2 Raj Rif, with 18 Grenadiers and 18 Garhwal Rifles providing a firm base and a diversionary respectively. Late Lt Col Ravindranath, the intrepid commanding officer of the unit, evolved a simple plan for the capture of the objective, in which Robin's company was to be a reserve, much to the disappointment of this courageous youngster. However, operations rarely go as planned and by the morning of 13 June, I was informed while at 56 Mountain Brigade operations room that the feature had not been fully captured and a part of it was holding on. I spoke to the commanding officer

and told him to firm in and give it a shot as and when an opportunity presented itself. By the time I reached my headquarters, I was informed of the capture of Tololing, in which Robin's desire for action was fulfilled. A bunker which was holding on was ordered to be captured and Robin, with his platoon, fearlessly charged and succeeded in his given task. The capture of Tololing was a turning point in the war and it was greatly appreciated by the nation. The battalion had suffered casualties, but when I met them in the evening, there was a determination and resolve in the rank and file to accept and succeed in any future task given to them.

I pulled the battalion back to Mughalpura for a much-deserved rest and recuperation. On 24 June, I gave 2 Raj Rif their second task, to capture Knoll and Three Pimples. The attack was to be launched on the night of 28–29 June. With clockwork precision, the battalion got down to its impending task. Robin's company, with his platoon, was to lead the attack.

Reconnaissance and planning were in progress, and Robin was busy gaining maximum information of the enemy deployment. Patrolling is an arduous operation and calls for skill and courage. Robin gained all the information by observation and stealthily moving close to the enemy. On the night of the attack, he announced to his men, 'I will shoot anyone who runs away, and if I turn back, shoot me.' In this one sentence, he displayed outstanding qualities of junior leadership. Knoll, the objective given to the battalion, was a difficult nut to crack. With precipitous slopes, every step one took, one could slip two steps back. I recall that night when the attack began supported with a heavy concentration of artillery fire. The enemy, similarly, sensing an imminent attack, retaliated with an equally heavy concentration of fire. Robin's platoon had been registered by the enemy, and one of the shells fell in close proximity, resulting in some casualties. He regained command and control of his reduced platoon and, undeterred by enemy action, looked for an opportunity to assault the lone bunker, which was bringing down heavy and effective fire. In the ensuing fierce action, an enemy bullet struck him in the head, and the battalion, the army and his family lost a brave young officer, who fought till his end to achieve the task entrusted to him. The objective was captured by 2 Raj Rif in the best

traditions of their regiment. This was perhaps the bloodiest of the battles of the entire war. I met the commanding officer the next day, his blood shot red eyes telling the pain of having lost three officers, eight men and fifty-two wounded in the operation.

Robin is no more, but his gallantry grit and dedication are a part of the history of the war in Kargil. For his courageous action at Tololing and Knoll, Robin was posthumously awarded the Vir Chakra. His parents, Col and Mrs Thapar, have kept the memory of Robin alive, and have faced the tragic loss of their son as only a soldier can. Col Thapar has been making a pilgrimage every year to the spot where Robin sacrificed his life for the glory of his battalion and the army. War leaves a trail of destruction, both in men and material, but leaves in its wake a silver lining reflected in the courage and bravery of our young officers and men who willingly sacrifice their lives so that you and I have a better tomorrow.

Lt Gen Mohinder Puri (Retired), PVSM, UYSM
Former vice chief of army staff and
general officer commanding, 8 Mountain Division

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Glossary

Bn	Battalion
Brig	Brigadier
Capt	Captain
CI	Counter-insurgency
CO	Commanding Officer
Col	Colonel
Coy Cdr	Company Commander
CSM	Company Sergeant Major
CHM	Company Havildar Major
CQMH	Company Quartermaster Havildar
Gen	General
GC	Gentleman Cadet
GOC	General Officer Commanding
Hav	Havildar
IMA	Indian Military Academy
JAK Rif	Jammu and Kashmir Rifles
JCO	Junior Commissioned Officer
Lt	Lieutenant
Lt Col	Lieutenant Colonel
L/Nk	Lance Naik
Lt Gen	Lieutenant General
LMG	Light Machine Gun
Maj	Major
Maj Gen	Major General
Nullah	Stream/brook

NLI	Northern Light Infantry (Pakistan Army)
NCO	Non-commissioned Officer
Nb Sub	Naib Subedar
Paltan	Battalion
Raj Rif	Rajputana Rifles
Rfn	Rifleman
Sangar	Temporary fortification constructed with rocks
Sub	Subedar
UMG	Universal Machine Gun>

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Col V.N. Thapar

This book became a reality with the whole-hearted support of 2nd Battalion, the Rajputana Rifles. I am indebted to late Col Ravindranath, who understood my need to know all about my son as a father and my urge to know all about the battle as an infantryman. He took the trouble to answer queries regarding both. He flew me over the famous Tololing feature in the first week of September in 1999 and described the details of the historic battle, and then we footed it all over Knoll as he recreated every detail of the battle. He took along all the men who had fought in the Battle of Knoll so that I could get a first-hand account of it. In our numerous meetings in the unit, at Drass, at our home in Noida, at Lt Vijyant Motors and at the multitude of functions we attended together, I always got the replies to the questions I asked. He also told me about Ruksana and made it a point to send her financial help in 1999 on my behalf. I want to thank all the succeeding commanding officers who encouraged me to write this book, in particular Col Digvijay Singh Parmar, who gave us all the help required.

I am deeply grateful to his colleagues, then Maj Mohit Saxena, VrC, Capt Praveen Tomar, SM, Capt Rautela and Majors Rathore, Sandeep Kala and Sandeep Bajaj, and others who took part in this battle. The actual blanks were filled by the JCOs, NCOs and the soldiers who were with him during the battle—Man Singh, Bhupinder, Summer, Shiv Nayak, Mahesh, Surinder, Mahender, Dhan Singh, Rajesh, Tilak Singh and others who helped me reconstruct every detail. I also thank Mrs Prema Kala, Mrs Charu Acharya and Anita for being with us like family. A word of thanks to Brig Ajoy Mukerji and Brig Wankhade for a glimpse of Robin as a GC in

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Finally, my thanks to Neha, my co-author, who did the actual spadework to produce the book in the form it now is. Her involvement in this subject is from the heart as she suffers the pain of having lost her father, Maj C.B. Dwivedi, SM, of 315 Field Regiment, in the war, four days after the attack on Knoll.

In the end, I would like to thank my family members: Tripta for recalling all the minor details and reliving the agony repeatedly and still standing firm with me, lending all the support I needed; Vijender, my son, along with his wife Roli, for their solid encouragement and for all the affectionate inspiration from my granddaughter, Vasundhara.

Neha Dwivedi

My mother, sister and I shifted to Delhi in August 1999. The country, especially its army (along with their families), was still recovering from the after-effects of the Kargil war. Many of us were relieved that it was over. Some of us, however, were enveloped in a deep sense of loss, from which we had no relief, even if we tried. On most days, post 2 July 1999, I would hate waking up, because every morning brought with it a realization that what had happened to us wasn't a nightmare. That the 'nightmare' was the reality and nothing could change that. My father had sacrificed his life on

the battlefield, and no matter what happened, he would never come back. Life as we knew it had come to a standstill, and the three of us just had to accept it. It seemed so wrong, so unfair. To have to live without the one person whom our family collectively depended on, in every possible way. How were we and people like us ever going to get through this? So many had lost the ‘head’ of their family, and I knew that each one of them felt exactly like we did—LOST.

Then one morning, my mother asked me to come to the living room to meet an uncle I had never met before. I was used to the drill now. Every now and then, we had visitors, who were back from the war or were visiting from out of town and wanted to visit the family of Maj C.B. Dwivedi, SM. What I didn’t know was that the rather OG (‘olive green’, a term often used in the army to describe a ‘by the book’ officer) gentleman sitting in front of me had more in common with me than I could fathom at the time. I duly wished him and took a seat opposite him. He turned to me and said, ‘Beta, do you know, my son was with your father in the war?’ The statement confused me, since the uncle’s son must have been a young boy. What did he mean when he said his son was with Daddy in the war? Where was he now? However, it didn’t take me too long to understand that he had been martyred too. That was the first time the reality of the destruction the war had caused hit me. ‘It didn’t just take away the fathers and the husbands, but also the sons and the brothers,’ I thought.

But he had a bright and comforting smile, and a relentless sense of pride about him. He went on to talk about his son with a twinkle in his eye and joy in his voice. Little did I know then that the man sitting in front of me was the father of the brave young officer Capt Vijyant Thapar, Vir Chakra, and two decades later, I would be again sitting across from him and listening to the many special stories of his son Robin’s (as he was fondly called) life and sacrifice. Stories that would make the backbone of a very special book.

A book for which the very first person I would like to thank is our editor, Roshini Dadlani. She not only held my hand through the process and constantly guided me without dictating how I should tread, but also thought

of me to be part of it. I am eternally grateful for the opportunity, and I hope to have done justice to it. I would also like to extend my gratitude to her team, especially Saloni Mital, for her effort in making our sentences better and patience while we kept doing back and forth.

Next and most importantly, the Thapars—Col Virender Thapar and his beautiful wife, Mrs Tripta Thapar. I will be forever awed by the honesty and sincerity with which they patiently sat with me and relived the days of their son's life. I know it wasn't easy, and I really look up to them for doing it regardless. They introduced me to a son par excellence. His upbringing had a lot to do with the person he was, and there is so much to learn from both of them as parents.

Vijender, Robin's brother, somewhere in the middle of our conversation, mentioned how he still felt Robin's presence on his morning runs. His stories made me realize how losing a sibling isn't just about losing a family member. You lose your partner, and have to make up for his absence. The experience he's had and owned up to so beautifully is unimaginable for me.

A very special thanks to his extended family, his aunts Mrs Snehlata Soin and Mrs Geeta Khullar, along with his dear cousins, Dr Urvashi Chandra and Mrs Priyanka Singhi, for not just welcoming me with warm smiles and open hearts, but also for trusting me enough to bare their journey with him. They introduced me to Robin, the nephew and the cousin, the family man.

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His course mates, Col Himanshu Kalia, Col Sumeet Dua and Col Vishwas Bahukhandi. From the day I dropped the first message to the day we finally met, each one of them made an extra effort to make the meeting possible, just for the sake of their friend. Considering they hadn't met him for way longer than they had known him, their enthusiasm in bringing his

story out spoke a lot about the place he holds in their hearts. I was truly humbled.

His regiment officers, Brig Sandeep Kala, Maj Gen Sandeep Bajaj, Col Mohit Saxena, Col Praveen Tomar and Lt Col Rautela. The one thing that was common to all of them was the smile with which they spoke about Robin. They introduced me to Robin, the regimental officer. Often their smiles and their tales made me feel like I was part of the narrative. A very special thanks to Brig Kala and Hav Dan Singh, for sitting patiently and explaining every detail of the operations, bit by bit, through words, pictures and sketches! This would not be complete without mentioning Mrs Charulata Acharya, wife of Robin's favourite 'Tau', Maj Padmapani Acharya, MVC. Her laughs while talking about his shenanigans were priceless.

I am extremely obliged to the serving officers and men of 2 Raj Rif, including the commanding officer, Col Parihar, and Maj Shukla, for offering and providing all that I troubled them with and hosting me and my husband graciously during our visit to the prestigious unit. I will never forget the one thing that Nb Sub Satyendra Singh, Hav Mahender Singh, Nb Sub Joginder Singh, Sub Sikander Singh, Hav Bhagwan Singh Rathore and Hav Soba Ram Singh said unanimously when asked what they remembered the most about Robin: '*Sahib hamesha hasta rehta tha* [He always had a smile on his face].' I am sanguine he is doing that now as well.

I cannot go further without thanking my friend Aaqib Raza Khan, for always finding the time to nudge me to write more while giving me invaluable and much-needed tips on how to take the next step.

Lastly, I would like to thank my mother, Mrs Bhawna Dwivedi, for being fed up with all my bizarre actions and decisions in life but supporting me through them regardless. My sister, my pride and joy, Diksha Dwivedi, for being my star and always making me believe that I can do anything. Finally, my husband, my best friend, Lt Col Rohin Chhibber, for doing his best to carry me through, always and every time.

I will forever carry the experience of the complete man that Robin had effortlessly managed to become, at the young age of twenty-two, with me.

As I told a friend after finishing the book, I miss him.

Twelve-year-old me often felt that my sister and I had missed out on all the war stories that our father might have told us. Perhaps I was destined to tell them instead . . .

For Robin, for Daddy, and for those who didn't make it back home to tell theirs . . .



THE BEGINNING

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